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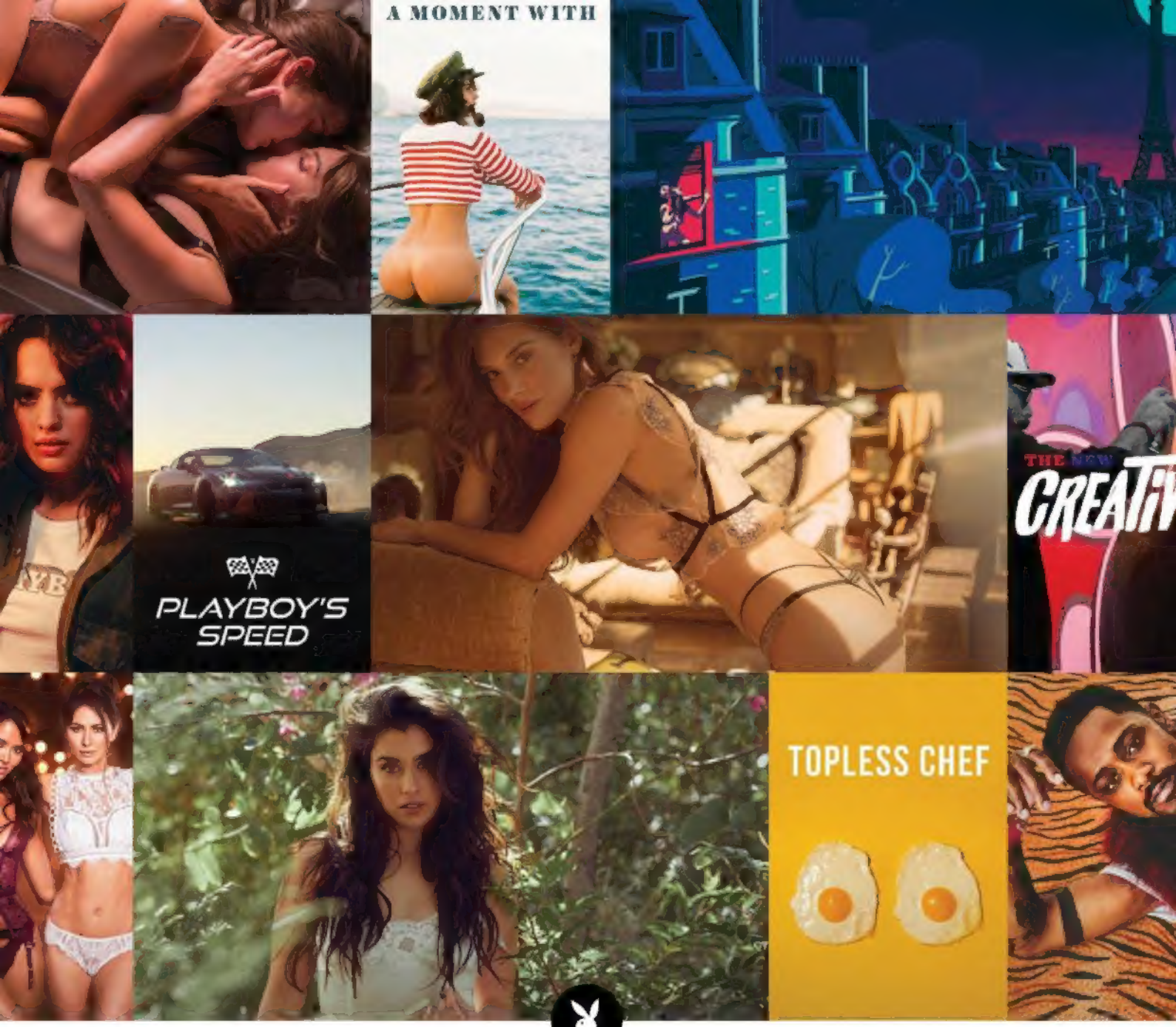

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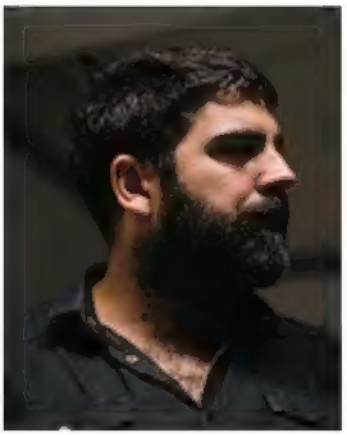

Riki Blanco
Madrid-based illustrator Blanco drew from his own experience to craft a piece for Red Tide Rising, Adam Skolnick's essay on American socialism. He also created the art for Chuck Palahniuk's Repercussions. "Everything is party, confetti, diversity, respect, community," he says of his creative process. On addressing free speech in a challenging political climate: "My work is almost always allegorical. Fortunately for artists, ambiguity gives us some leeway."

Jesse Hyde
In When Spirituality Goes Viral, the Salt Lake City–based journalist delves into the life of spiritual leader Bentinho Massaro, whose rhetoric some believe incited a suicide. "Historically, a cult leader was limited by geography and traditional social networks," says Hyde. "Today, dangerous ideas spread more quickly thanks to social media, which is built for bingeing. That's scary, but it's an open question whether a cult can really take off entirely online."

Luis Gomez
An internationally renown photographer, producer, editor, videographer and musician, whose work is published worldwide. Luis Gomez is known as a guitar player and exclusive artist signed by Gibson guitars and producer and filmmaker. Luis Gomez is the CEO of Universe 137 Studios And Chicas Universe 137 working with more than 40 magazines.

Sarah Maxwell
When reading the five Playboy Symposium essays to inspire her accompanying artwork, illustrator Maxwell (who also provided the NSFW visuals for Dirty Talk) was struck by Christopher Stroop's piece on bad-faith arguments regarding free speech and religion. "Being an openly lesbian artist, I want to create a platform for the community to be seen and normalised," the Paris-based Texas native says. "Love is something everyone can relate to, regardless of gender."

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Alexa Ortiz, photography by Ryan Dwyer
No 21 March 2019

RAZER THRESHER 7.1

The Thresher 7.1 wireless gaming headset is lightweight and extremely comfortable to wear. It's lined with leatherette and comes with memory foam cushions for optimal noise isolation and sound quality output. The Thresher 7.1 features Dolby technology, a retractable boom mic and built-in volume controls. The wireless dongle offers a lag-free long-distance connection up to 12 metres while each charge can provide up to 16-hours of gameplay. Thanks to its design, aside from a premium audio experience, you also get to look the part of an epic gamer.

RAZER PORTAL SMART WIFI ROUTER

Imagine a router that was faster, well the Portal is. With its dual-band ultra-fast speed and improved signal and reception capabilities it offers a lightning-fast connection even with other devices jamming up the network. Thanks to its patented multi-channel ZeroWait ZWDFS technology, you now get access to FastLanes™ (only on compatible devices) that bypasses airwave congestion. The Portal is perfectly tailor-made for a premium gaming and streaming experience.

TRUST MYRA GXT 840

The Myra is a full-size keyboard optimally designed for easy use and comfort during those long gaming sessions. It comes with functions like 5 programmable macro keys and 12 direct access media keys putting all the control of your media right at your fingertips. Its sporty body is further enhanced with 3-colour LED illumination settings allowing you to set the mood. If you truly want to 'config your rig' then the Myra is a tasteful and worthwhile addition.

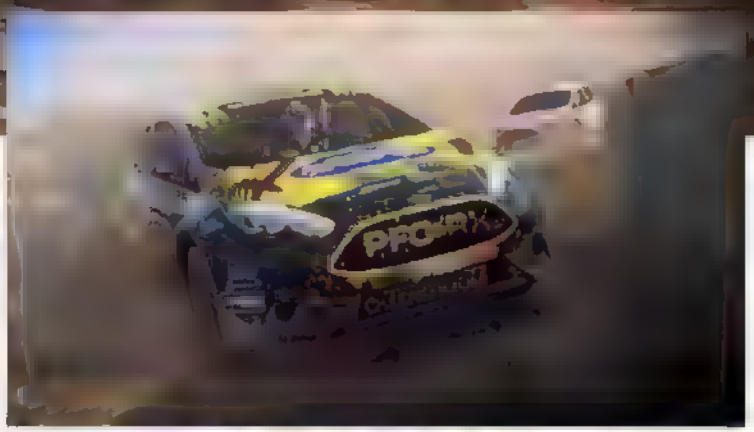
TRUST CELOX GXT 165

The Celox gaming mouse fits nicely in the palm of your hand and has a high-precision optical sensor (up to 10 000 DPI), 8 programmable buttons and an interesting function that allows you to adjust its weight. Its modern stylish design is slick with its customisable RGB lighting and multiple colour cycles. Quick access keys improve overall in-game reaction time while its rough coatings on the sides ensure overall comfort as well as a solid grip during those heated and extensive gaming sessions.

METRO EXODUS

Available on PC, PS4 and XBOX ONE

Metro Exodus is an epic, story-driven first-person shooter from 4A Games that blends deadly combat and stealth with exploration and survival horror. Set in 2036, two decades after nuclear war devastated the earth, a few thousand survivors still cling to existence in the Metro tunnels beneath the ruins of Moscow. They have struggled against the poisoned elements, fought mutated beasts and suffered the flames of civil war. But now, as Artyom, you must flee the Metro and lead a band of Spartan Rangers on an incredible, continent-spanning journey across post-apocalyptic Russia in search of a new life in the East. Your choices determine your comrades' fate - not all your companions will survive the journey. Explore the Russian wilderness and follow a thrilling story-line that spans an entire year through spring, summer and autumn to the depths of nuclear winter in one of the most immersive game worlds ever created.



DIRT RALLY 2.0

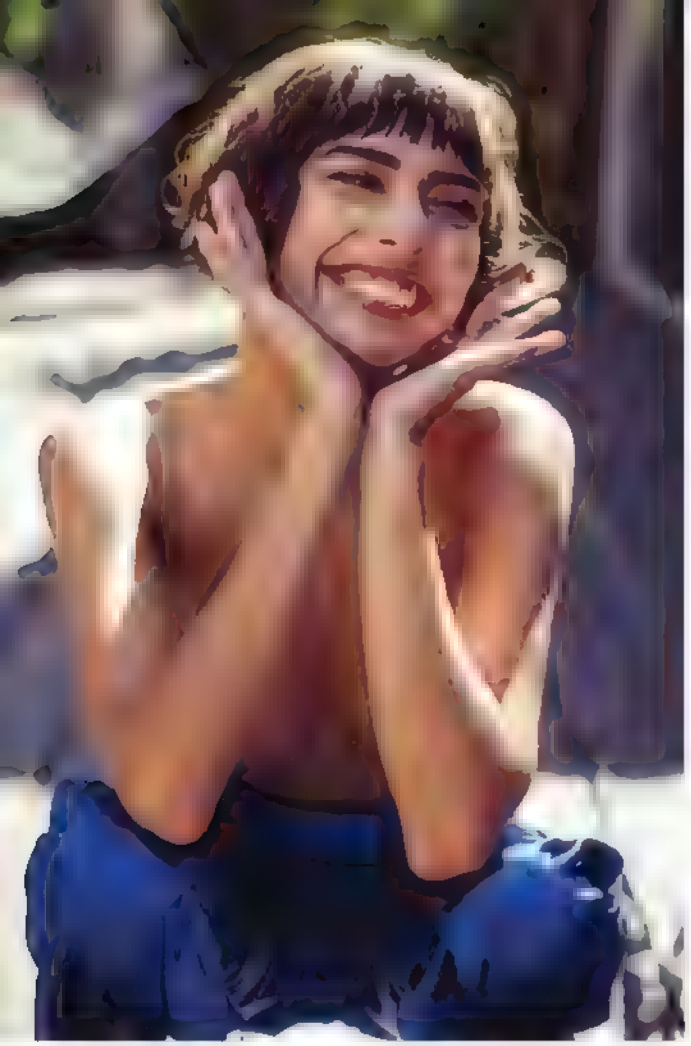
Available on PC, PS4 and XBOX ONE

This new release in the Dirt franchise will test your instincts with the most immersive and truly focused off-road experience yet, including a new authentic handling model, tyre choice and surface deformation. Power your rally car through real-life off-road environments in New Zealand, Argentina, Spain, Poland, Australia and the USA, with only your co-driver and instincts to guide you Race on eight official circuits from the FIA World Rallycross championship, complete with licensed Supercars and support series Develop your team and cars around race strategies, and progress through a varied selection of Events and Championships in both a single player Career Campaign and a competitive online environment. Dirt Rally 2.0 features over 50 of the most powerful off-road cars ever built allowing you to tear through environments with an iconic roster of historic and modern-day rally car favourites from VW, Mitsubishi, Citroen and Chevrolet. Create your own team, hire your staff and expand your garage of vehicles while also tuning and upgrading your vehicles to perfection

Cryptocurrency hasn't been the sexiest tech craze — but that's about to change. Meet the woman hoping to modernize (and protect) the transactional relationship

JANICE GRIFFITH

LINA ABASCAL



Janice Griffith, an AVN Awards best actress nominee and co-founder of SpankChain, a start-up that aims to make sex work safer via blockchain technology, is no manic pixie porn girl. Along with her political activism (she promotes the decriminalization of sex work alongside Sex Workers Outreach Project), her vocal opposition to racism in the adult industry (she's an outspoken critic of marketing that fetishizes nonwhite performers) and her entrepreneurship (in June she launched Fleshlight's first-ever "medium-toned" toy), her passion remains having sex on camera and being paid for it.

And much of what the 23-year-old New York native does online and off is geared toward protecting her right to do so. That includes her current efforts to resolve the dangers now facing sex workers in the United States following passage of the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act. A set of anti- trafficking bills signed into law by the president last April, FOSTASESTA gives officials the right to police websites that host advertisements for sex work, effectively equating illegal sex trafficking with consensual sex for pay.

Assistant Attorney General Stephen Boyd, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Justice, released a memo stating that a certain provision of FOSTA may be unconstitutional and that the act "is broader than necessary because it [extends] to situations where there is minimal federal interest, such as to instances in which an individual person uses a cell phone to manage local commercial sex transactions involving consenting adults." Pro–free speech groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union, have come out in opposition to the legislation, saying it drastically weakens protections against internet censorship. And by censoring and criminalizing the presence of sex workers, Griffith argues, FOSTA-SESTA removes their ability to vet potential clients, creating more risk within an already marginalized population.

"Policing women's bodies and what we can do for money is a huge problem we're constantly facing," says Griffith. "I know sex workers who have died or gone missing because they lost access to screening services. How far can FOSTA-SESTA overreach? What will it lay the precedent for?"

It's important to note that Griffith doesn't differentiate between adult performers and other sex workers. Some inside the adult industry perceive a pecking order in which they place themselves higher than those who exchange money for intimate sexual activity. Griffith laughs that off, saying, "We're all whores to them." That's what prompted her to engage the adult industry with the tech community in a way that doesn't simply monetize but protects. Primarily she wants to create safer options for reliable financial transactions.

"Right now, models want to accept money and people want to give us money, but there's no way to make that happen," she says. "My Cash App was shut down, and for what reason?" The answer, of course, is that sex workers are not a protected group within the United States, allowing payment processors to discriminate against them and the services they provide. At the federal level, selling your body falls within the same legal and financial category as selling marijuana. Most FDIC- insured banks can't touch the money.

Enter SpankChain. "Cryptocurrency has the potential to give us more agency with what we do," Griffith explains. Founded in 2017 by a team of six that includes Griffith, a UX designer, a software developer and a selfdescribed "Russian hacker," SpankChain aims to "create the infrastructure for pornographers and sex workers to accept cryptocurrency in a safe way" by using a blockchain network called Ethereum. (That means users trade not in Bitcoin but in a currency called ether.) The start-up has gained the attention of Forbes, and CoinDesk, an outlet that covers the cryptocurrency market, has applauded its efforts to keep transaction fees low for its users. "The smartest thing you can do is be financially independent of platforms like PayPal, Venmo, Square," says Griffith. For her, the blockchain, while largely discounted by Wall Street as the nebulous Wild West of banking, may be the key to economic freedom for sex workers.

• • •

Formerly a girl of the Warped Tour persuasion, Griffith entered porn about five years ago. Early on, she had purple hair, multiple body and facial piercings and gauged ears. Her hair is now natural and her ears sewn up, yet she still labels herself "alternative" based on how the industry she works in handles her racial ambiguity. "I'm half white, half Indian," she says matterof- factly. "They can't pigeonhole my ethnicity. Every scene I shoot is interracial." She'll have sex with performers of all races and ethnicities but refuses to participate in scenes promoted as interracial, a porn category that generally features sex between whites and blacks. She also refuses to participate in certain scenes depicting workplace relationships or unfair power dynamics. "The plot matters. It's so highconcept now," she says. "We're not just having sex."

Griffith's passion for porn has gotten her into plenty of trouble. She has been either banned or deleted from Twitter and Instagram at various points in her career. In response to her love for pornography, trolls often taunt, "Imagine what her dad thinks." ("My dad loves me unconditionally," she counters.) Still, none of this has made Griffith want to step away from the adult industry. Rather, she hopes to continue establishing herself as a respectable voice within her chosen field, with no ulterior motives involving breaking free, crossing over or moving on. She won't be pushed out. If the industry loses her, it will be because she wanted to leave. In the meantime, Griffith isn't hell-bent on impressing you. But if you pay attention, she may do so anyway. ■

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **KAYLA VARLEY**

The Future of Heroes Is FEMALE

It took long enough, but with *Captain Marvel* flying into theaters, women are finally getting their fair chance to save the world.

BY **ERIC DUCKER**

When director Rachel Talalay went to San Diego Comic-Con in 1995 to promote her film *Tank Girl*, based on a British comic about a superpower-less woman who, well, drives a tank, the fest was a fraction of the spectacle it is today. Back then, the event was a more honest celebration of comic books, with far less coopting by studios looking to push their movies and TV shows. That's mostly because movies and TV shows based on comic books were rare. According to Talalay, who now directs for television on shows including *The Flash* and *Supergirl*, another crucial difference between Comic-Con of the 1990s and Comic-Con today was how few women filed inside the convention center. "When I took *Tank Girl* there, I brought in this female audience who had nothing," Talalay says. "The only women in Comic-Con were the booth babes."

Tank Girl ultimately flopped. Talalay blames executives who, she says, pushed her out of the editing process and turned the film into something nonsensical. Two decades later, much has changed in the comics-based entertainment ecosystem, as exemplified by the March release of *Captain Marvel* — the first film from the Marvel Cinematic Universe to have a female lead. Set in the 1990s, it follows Carol Danvers, an Air Force pilot with special powers who gets embroiled in an intergalactic war. Heading into its release, the film has unprecedented momentum and appeal. *Avengers: Infinity War* ended with a wallop, and it's clear Danvers and her alter ego will play a substantial role in cleaning up Thanos's cosmic trauma in the fourth *Avengers* installment, scheduled for May. *Captain Marvel* also has the opportunity to prolong the hot streak.

Marvel Studios has achieved in its so-called "phase three," with the critical and commercial successes of *Black Panther*, *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Spider-Man: Homecoming*. And with the ascendant Brie Larson in the lead role, *Captain Marvel* is the first Marvel Studios film headlined by an Oscar winner. "It's going to be one of the biggest movies of the year," says Paul Dergarabedian, a senior analyst at comScore, a leading media analytics company. "It's no question."

Such confidence in a female-led film is a new phenomenon in Hollywood, especially within Marvel Studios and its corporate parent, Disney, which bought the company in 2009. Over the course of 10 years and 20 Marvel Studios movies, female superheroes have served as supporting players (the *Avengers* and *Guardians of the Galaxy* series) or shared equal billing in a sequel (*Ant-Man and the Wasp*). DC Films and Warner Bros. haven't done much better in their decades-long partnership. Warner has released seven live-action films about Batman, six about Superman and one about them fighting each other. It wasn't until 2017 that the studio finally put out its first stand-alone female superhero movie, *Wonder Woman*.

Wonder Woman didn't just collect more than $800 million at the global box office; it positioned the studio — whether intentionally or not — at the forefront of a culture-defining moment, one informed by the 2016 election and, to be more insular, a lack of enthusiasm for *Batman* post–Christopher Nolan. "*Wonder Woman* had a particular resonance among female viewers, and even male viewers who wanted their daughters to be inspired by her character," Dergarabedian says, perhaps referring to the fact that the film inspired

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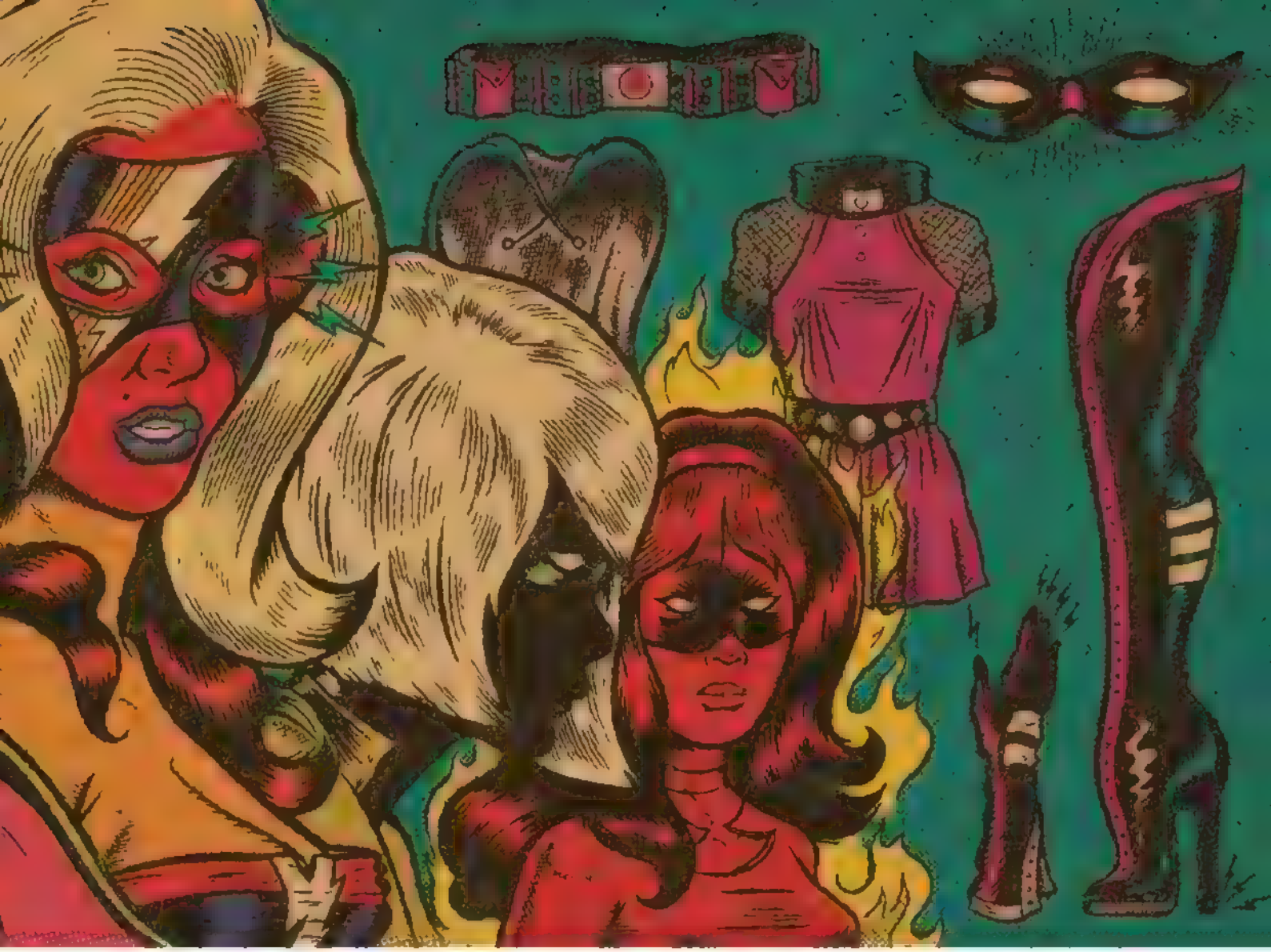

women-only viewings across the country, as well as one of the most popular Halloween costumes of 2017.

With *Wonder Woman*, DC Films finally delivered to a movie audience that, nationally, is becoming less male and less white. "We've known for years that fandom has become more inclusive, more diverse and, frankly, more feminine than ever," says Matthew Smith, a professor at Radford University and author of *Critical Approaches to Comics*. The record-breaking box office tallies of both *Black Panther* and *Wonder Woman* prove Smith's assertion. "The reality that you would market only products that are tailored to an audience of white males is surprising," Smith continues. "There's more money available to you. Why are you not going after that money?"

For comic book enthusiasts, the answer is clearly that for so long, Hollywood didn't know the formula. Aside from *Tank Girl*, *Catwoman* and *Elektra*, both commercial flops, were released within six months of each other between 2004 and 2005. Halle Berry's and Jennifer Garner's films failed for various reasons, including, respectively, divorcing *Catwoman* from the Batman universe and creating a Daredevil spin-off that no one wanted.

Their poor showings (*Catwoman* made $40 million domestically and *Elektra* $24 million) justified to film executives that they needn't invest in movies about female superheroes, and that line of thinking prevailed for more than a decade.

But Dergarabedian likes to counter that dry-era theory by noting the precedent of commercially successful female-led action movies predating *Wonder Woman*. He cites Sigourney Weaver's portrayal of Ripley in the early Alien movies and, more recently, Jennifer Lawrence in *The Hunger Games* franchise, the first film of which established March as a reliable month for launching block busters. Following her 2015 performance in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, Charlize Theron starred in *Atomic Blonde*, which completed her evolution into a bankable action heroine after *Aeon Flux*'s 2005 failure. Scarlett Johansson carried Luc Besson's sci-fi action flick *Lucy* to almost $500 million worldwide in 2014. And yet, for almost a decade, Johansson's Marvel character remained a supporting player. That will change soon. Marvel green-lit a *Black Widow* stand-alone film last year.

When *Black Widow* debuts, it will be the direc torial work of Australian filmmaker Cate Shortland. Her hiring is an example of how, in the midst of Time's Up, female inclusiveness is finally registering on both sides of the camera. *Catwoman* and *Elektra* were both directed by men; *Wonder Woman* clearly benefited from the vision of Patty Jenkins, who is directing its sequel, *Wonder Woman 1984*. *Captain Marvel* a lso h as a f emale d irector (albeit as half of a husband-and-wife team, Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck), and six of its seven credited screenwriters are women.

Even with all the goodwill, *Captain Marvel* isn't a sure bet. For one, outside comic book fan circles, the Air Force pilot is a largely unknown figure as is an earlier incarnation, Ms. Marvel even though she has been around in various forms since the 1970s. But optimists would argue that this lack of familiarity could work to the film's advantage. After all, does anyone need to see Bruce Wayne's parents die yet again? *Captain Marvel* might make you actually give a damn about the Kree or the fact that the hero glows in the trailers like she's tripping on ayahuasca. It also might make you wonder what took so long. ■

SUSAN
LEE RIGG
ANDREW LANGHOLT

Describe yourself in three words
I am creative, outgoing , absolutely love art

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Yes very much so.

What was it like starting out as a model?
It was fun learning how to pose at a young age at 12.

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
The biggest challenge is changing your poses all the time

Describe your perfect day off when you are not modelling?
My perfect day would have to be out in nature with water,

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person?
I grew up in the city I am more a country person.

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
I would have to say either Italy or France

Do you have a secret talent?
Yes, my secret talent is painting

A guilty pleasure?
My guilty pleasure is video games.

Which song is absolutely certain to make you cry whenever you hear it?
I love the song smile. Even thought your heart is breaking inside amazing song

What is your favourite word in any language and what does it mean?
Amour french work for love

Any last words you would like to share with the readers?
Thank you for reading it's always a pleasure.

TOURIST AT

TTRACTION

An unusual form of sex tourism wants to set up shop in the States. Can they handle it in the era of #MeToo?

BY **SUSAN SHAIN**

On a quiet street in northern Toronto, among well-kept yards, luxury cars and a small Christian-owned business, sits a five-bedroom stone house. A neatly coiffed woman drives by in a Mercedes, likely unaware of the home's inhabitants, six bare Barbie- proportioned life-size silicone dolls available for rent by the half hour or the hour. All day, every day, while life and oxygen and men move around them, the dolls lie stock-still on white sheets, their anime-esque eyes staring vacantly at the building's stately high ceilings. This is the headquarters of Aura Dolls.

Opened in September 2018, Aura Dolls is one of the first sex-doll brothels in North America. It charges patrons 120 Canadian dollars for an hour with one of its "classy, sophisticated and adventurous ladies." Aura's owners — anonymous Canadian entrepreneurs—came up with the attraction when they discovered similar successful establishments while vacationing in Japan. In the past two years, sex-doll brothels have popped up in countries throughout Europe, including Spain, France, Germany, Denmark and Austria, and have now begun to roll into North America — but not without public outcry.

Last year, another Canadian-based company, KinkySdollS, attempted to open the first such brothel in the United States, in Houston. Before KinkySdollS could even hang new signage, Houston's city council blocked it by updating a local ordinance to ban citizens from partaking in sex at a business with any device that resembles a human. "I know there's some people that will sit there and say, 'What does the City of Houston have to do with any of this?' " councilman Greg Travis told USA Today at the time. "And the answer is we're not getting into your bedroom, but don't bring it into our district. Don't bring it into our city. This is not a good business for our city. We are not Sin City."

Beyond triggering neighbors, sex-doll brothels have raised serious questions about sexual ethics and power dynamics. In 2017, the world's first known such brothel, Barcelona's LumiDolls, was reportedly bombarded with requests for childlike dolls and bedroom scenes glorifying rape. Last fall, Vancouver's BellaDolls was blasted for encouraging customers to "forget the restrictions and limitations" that accompany "a real partner." And Aura marketing director Claire Lee tells me the company's workers have found dolls "all bent up" after sessions and have even had to ban one customer who showed up with fake blood.

Despite these disturbing stories, brothel owners argue they're not doing any harm — and may actually

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MOLLY CRANNA**

be providing a valuable service to society. Lee claims the majority of Aura's patrons aren't miscreants but people whose sexual needs aren't being met elsewhere, such as those diagnosed with autism or suffering from social anxiety, men with uninterested wives and widowers seeking companionship. One of the brothel's most frequent customers, she says, is a man in his mid-30s who comes in several days a week, several hours at a time, to have sex, cuddle and watch TV.

It may be easy to imagine Aura as a cross between a seedy massage parlor and a realized Westworld, but it's quite the opposite. There's no bar and no flirting. Instead, the entire experience is designed to eliminate human interaction. After arriving, patrons text Aura's control room, which remotely unlocks the front door. (Before leaving, they'll text again to ensure they won't run into anyone on the way out.) A small sign instructs visitors to "remove shoes and leave payment," and the interior lighting is dim and romantic, with white fabric enshrouding the windows. During my visit, I meet Anna lying on an unremarkable bed.

Anna, I'm told, is the most popular doll, and she proudly flaunts a 32H bust. With no blood flowing through her, a space heater whirs in an attempt to keep her warm. Her makeup looks fresh because it's reapplied every day. Her fake eyelashes are secured with heavy-duty Gorilla Glue.

Across the hall in another room sits Yuki, an underage-looking "Korean" doll whose touted personality traits—including "submissive" and "innocent" — conjure racial stereotypes. Within arm's reach is everything you'll need to get to know her: three LifeStyles condoms, paper towels and a bottle of K-Y Jelly. A remote control sits on the side table, encased in a plastic bag. When maneuvered, it lights up a television screen with Pornhub's home page.

Down a spiraling staircase is more silence and silicone. Inside room number three I meet Scarlett (ethnicity: "American"). When the door shuts, her manicured fingers jiggle, and I can't help but think of the 1998 animated movie *Small Soldiers*, a PG-13-rated version of *Toy Story* in which the Barbie dolls are far more violent than you'd imagine. As with the other dolls, conversation isn't Scarlett's strong suit. Her fans likely come only to enjoy one of her three holes, each of which features "different yet unique textures, ridges and tightness." Scarlett's skin is velvety, if not exactly warm, and her accoutrements feel surprisingly real. The entire time I'm there, her eyes remain wide open, unblinking, glassy, ready to experience what people pay to do to her. She will never say no.

Of course, when you're inanimate you can't say "Keep going" or "Stop." No "Is this okay?" or "Does this feel good?" Even the most advanced sex dolls on the market — equipped with artificial intelligence, self-lubrication and heated skin—can't hold a conversation. This has attracted scrutiny in the #MeToo era, as it effectively means they can't give or revoke consent. Matt McMullen, founder of sex-doll manufacturer Abyss Creations, calls the consent debate "severely premature." He recently launched Harmony, a doll equipped with an artificially intelligent head that fits onto his

company's voluptuous bodies. Harmony can answer basic questions about her favorite movies and remember facts about the user. Although intelligent, she's certainly not conscious — nor should she be, as that's her main draw.

"I don't think a sex doll or robot should have the ability to say yes or no any more than my toaster," says McMullen. "When we've created an AI that's truly self-aware and fully capable of experiencing the things human beings experience — such as pain, rejection, abuse — they would no longer be simple machines." That, he says, is when the issue of consent should come into play. McMullen doesn't believe men's behavior with robots will bleed into their behavior with women, as "most stable-minded humans will know the difference." He points to video games, in which players gleefully steal cars or jump off buildings but would never do so in real life.

Christa B. Daring, executive director of the U.S. chapter of the Sex Workers Outreach Project, also thinks of sex dolls — even ones with AI — as toys, not stand-ins. "There's no requirement to gain consent, because it's an object," Daring says. "I don't gain the consent of the vibrators I use. I don't think that depletes my ability to gain consent with humans." On the same page is Barbara G. Brents, professor of sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. "We learn our behaviors from a wide variety of sources," she says. "To think a few sex dolls are going to dramatically remake gender relationships and the notion of consent is kind of ridiculous."

The United Kingdom's Campaign Against Sex Robots views the issue differently. On its website it states the machines "are potentially harmful and will contribute to inequalities in society" for reasons including the sexual objectification of women and children, the reduction of sex workers to "things" and the diminishment of human empathy. The founder, stating that "PLAYBOY promotes and profits from the dehumanization of women," declined to comment for this article.

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As for the sex-tourism industry in general, experts don't imagine these dolls will create new tourist economies anytime soon — at least not until the technology has advanced significantly. Brents cites her research on sex workers, which found that only half the respondents list "sexual gratification" as their primary reason for paying for sex. The rest seek intimacy, connection and communication. "Most females and males want a human on the other end of that genital," she says.

When more realistic, "thinking" robots are inevitably created, University of British Columbia economist Marina Adshade says, they could render human sex workers obsolete altogether. A frequent writer on robots and relationships, Adshade sums this up as "technology replacing labor. And I think it's inevitable."

After I leave Aura, I stroll past a row of elegant houses. A woman stands at an upstairs window. She pulls the curtain back and, while speaking to someone on her phone, glares at the brothel. The future is just beyond her doorstep, and she's not happy about it.

ROXANE GAY IS NOT SORRY

Getting to know one of America's most important and outspoken cultural commentators—a woman who can quote rape culture and sing the praises of Law & Order SVU in a single breath

BY **JESSICA P. OGILVIE**

Sitting on an Eames-style bar stool next to a white marble kitchen island in her Los Angeles home, Roxane Gay swipes through a music app, searching for something to set the mood and singing the praises of her in-house sound system.

"Oh my God, it's the world's best speakers," she says. Settling on Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, she hits on "Hold Up" and the song comes washing in from all sides. Gay is an avowed fan; she all but live-tweeted the Carters' On the Run II concert at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California last September.

Dressed in a slate-blue shirt and jeans, Gay is addressing a makeup artist, PLAYBOY's photography team and me. She's relaxed and chatty, her honey-smooth voice edged with a wry wit.

It's an outgoing side of the 44-year-old author and columnist—one that is not always on display. When we first meet, a few days before, Gay is decidedly more reserved. Opening the door with a warm hello, she pads quietly past two carefully curated bookcases, offering me water and a seat on the couch. She joins me, sitting beneath the slanted living room roof and across from a sliding glass door that looks out onto a sundrenched patio, and we chat about John Branch's book *The Last Cowboys*, a copy of which is on the table.

But Gay keeps her legs and arms crossed, responding to my attempts at small talk with single sentences capped by faint smiles. I don't know whether to read this as innate shyness or a practiced technique to avoid revealing too much to journalists. After all, over the past several years Gay has put her opinions and her personal life on display through her writing, becoming a go-to critic on the most urgent cultural buttons: rape culture, #MeToo, gun control, racism, Louis C.K., Brett Kavanaugh and Roseanne Barr. Unafraid to call out privilege, hypocrisy or entrenched social injustice, Gay has an ever-growing corpus, 530,000 Twitter followers tracking her every move and legions of fans lined up at her events, clutching books for her to sign. So it's understandable if she's tired of saying what she thinks—or wary of what might be made of her words.

"I'm still a work in progress," she says. "I'm giving myself permission to be human and to be flawed and also to protect myself. It's taken a long time to get to a place where I'm willing to do that, but I am."

• • •

Roxane Gay emerged as a public thinker to reckon with sometime around the early

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RYAN PFLUGER**

"MEN NEED TO START HOLDING EACH OTHER ACCOUNTABLE AND SAYING, 'YOU KNOW WHAT? THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE.' "

2010s with an explosive essay published on an indie blog. But she was a fiction writer first, beginning at a very young age.

Raised primarily in Omaha, Nebraska by Haitian parents, Gay traveled frequently thanks to her father's work as an engineer. She routinely started over at new schools with new friends, returning to Omaha between her father's projects. This constant change, along with what she describes as her naturally "not super social" temperament, fanned her love of storytelling — a love she discovered around the age of four, when she would pen short fables on napkins. She followed this passion through high school, college and graduate school, eventually landing a job teaching English at Purdue University in Indiana.

Gay wrote essays and reportage in addition to her fiction, but it wasn't until she penned a 2011 piece for The Rumpus that demand for her voice began to intensify. The essay, "The Careless Language of Sexual Violence," was a response to a *New York Times* article about the gang rape of an 11-year-old girl that focused on the aftermath of the event and the way it affected the town and the perpetrators' lives — seemingly more interested in those concerns than the way the horrific crime affected the victim.

"The article was like, 'Oh, the poor town is reeling,' " she says, "and I was just like, 'Huh, really? I'm pretty sure the child is reeling.' I was just incensed, and so I wrote this essay in about two hours."

Her response took the newspaper to task, speculating as to how the writer, James McKinley Jr., could be "more concerned about the 18 men than one girl," and concluded that as a society we have become "anesthetized or somehow willfully distanced from such brutal realities" as gang rape. The essay became part of a teeming online conversation about how newspapers cover sexual assault — and put Gay on the map as a fearless and incisive cultural commentator.

"That was the first moment in this stage of my career," she says. "After that, there was an audience for what I had to say, and so I just kept writing my opinions."

Those opinions have since appeared in the pages of the Times itself, where she is a contributing writer, as well as in dozens of other publications. In 2014 she published a book of essays entitled *Bad Feminist*; it became a *New York Times* best-seller. She co-penned a Marvel comic, *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*, and 2017 saw the publication of her memoir, Hunger, as well as *Difficult Women*, a book of short stories. In 2018 she edited two books, *The Best American Short Stories* and *Not That Bad: Dispatches From Rape Culture*, plus a series of essays on the publishing platform Medium called *Unruly Bodies*.

Gay is known for her formidable output — in addition to the above publication schedule, she clocked at least 58 speaking engagements in 2018 alone — but she's most recognized for her singular way of wielding a pen. Her opinion pieces are pointed and unequivocal and yet delivered with keen self-awareness. She says what she means in clear, concise sentences, the English professor brought to bear. And she's not bashful about using herself as a reference point: She talks openly about the challenges of being a black woman, a bisexual woman and, in her own words, a "fat woman" in a society that would punish her for all of the above.

More recently, Gay has written multiple *Times* columns on the #MeToo movement and all its twists and subplots. A primary thread in her writing is America's outsize concern for the welfare of the accused men, which tends to far exceed concern for the victims. In an August 29, 2018 op-ed entitled "Louis C.K. and Men Who Think Justice Takes As Long As They Want It To," Gay wrote that public figures like C.K. who have been accused of sexual misconduct have "fallen from grace, but they have had mighty soft landings." The victims, though, "have been disbelieved. They have had to withstand accusations that they are seeking attention. Justice has been grandly elusive."

She continued her train of thought following the Brett Kavanaugh Senate hearings, in an October 5, 2018 piece, "I Thought Men Might Do Better Than This." On the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, Gay wrote, "Despite everything we know about the prevalence of sexual assault and harass ment, women are still not believed. Their experiences are still minimized. And the male perpetrators of these crimes are given all manner of leniency." She went on to note that a handful of accused men are beginning to complain about their treatment by the public, calling journalist John Hockenberry's *Harper's* essay examining his life after sexual harassment claims "aggressively self-pitying." Former CBC Radio host Jian Ghomeshi "presents himself as the misunderstood hero of his own narrative" in his *New York Review of Books* post-accusation essay, "Reflections From a Hashtag." And Kavanaugh, she wrote, was "a self-indulgent brat" during his confirmation hearings. (It's worth noting that her article, with its careful analysis and focused anger, begins with a meditation on *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*; few critics can juggle politics and pop culture as deftly as Gay.)

When I ask her what drives this willingness to say what so many women — and, I presume, men — are thinking, Gay responds, "I just try to be as honest as I can and as open as I can."

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For her opinions, Gay attracts frequent dissenters, many of whom confront her on Twitter. But Gay, whose Twitter bio includes the line "If you clap, I clap back," seldom hesitates to respond. A brief scroll through her feed will turn up several such exchanges. With her talent for well-aimed ripostes, she has learned to enjoy the platform's famously indecorous tone.

"In general, I just try to engage with people who are interesting or funny, and then of course the occasional troll, and that's just for fun," she says. "It's like a pressure release. I mean, you have the audacity to speak to me that way? Well, then whatever happens next is on you."

For the most part, Gay says, she has no regrets about what she writes. Indeed,

her thoughts seem to roll out of her mouth fully formed; as our conversation continues, I often feel as if she's dictating an op-ed directly into my tape recorder

"People are going to respond to my work how they respond, and that's fine," she says. "But I know I can handle the consequences of having my opinion."

I wonder aloud if Gay has ever experienced fear or regret with regard to her work — as most writers do — and by now I'm expecting a no

"Yeah," she says, "only once. I mean, I always experience fear, because I write about fairly volatile topics, but the one thing I was afraid of and that I regret not doing more was writing in support of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election."

At the time, she explains, it felt dangerous. Clinton supporters were picked apart, as was the candidate herself And in an uncharacteristic moment, Gay let that outside pressure affect her

"I really thought that Hillary was an outstanding candidate, but people have so many very vocal and very deeply entrenched opinions about her, and when you support her publicly, there's a lot of backlash," she says. "There were definitely times when I thought, Oh, I could write an op-ed about this, and I just got overwhelmed. And I thought, I don't have the time to deal with this, and I do regret that."

After Trump was elected, she says, she promised herself she would never again hold back out of fear. "I'll just live with the fear

and make myself uncomfortable," she says, "and say what needs to be said."

• • •

Gay's followers might fervently agree with her politics, but her work also resonates with many on a deeper level. A large part of her writing in recent years has centered around self-revelation, around publicly digging through the darkest parts of her past and the darkest corners of her mind. In Hunger, she writes frankly and heartbreakingly about the gang rape she suffered at the age of 12. She writes about how she used food as a way to take back a semblance of control, to make "my body into what I needed it to be — a safe harbor rather than a small, weak vessel that betrayed me."

In doing press for the book, Gay repeatedly explained that she didn't really want to write it but felt compelled to do so.

"I was just reluctant to write the book because I knew it was going to require a level of vulnerability that was going to be difficult," she says, "and it was going to make me feel very exposed out in the world. But I also knew that I wanted to write a book about fatness that I would have loved to have read at any point in my adult life, and one that wasn't grounded in inspiration and weight loss."

It's that ability to be so raw in her prose, says actress and author Amber Tamblyn, that's behind the zeal of Gay's fans. Tamblyn hosts a reading series with Gay called Feminist AF, and she believes that Gay possesses a combination of intellect and openness rare among Ph.D.s and that she's one of the very few academic writers willing to descend from the ivory tower.

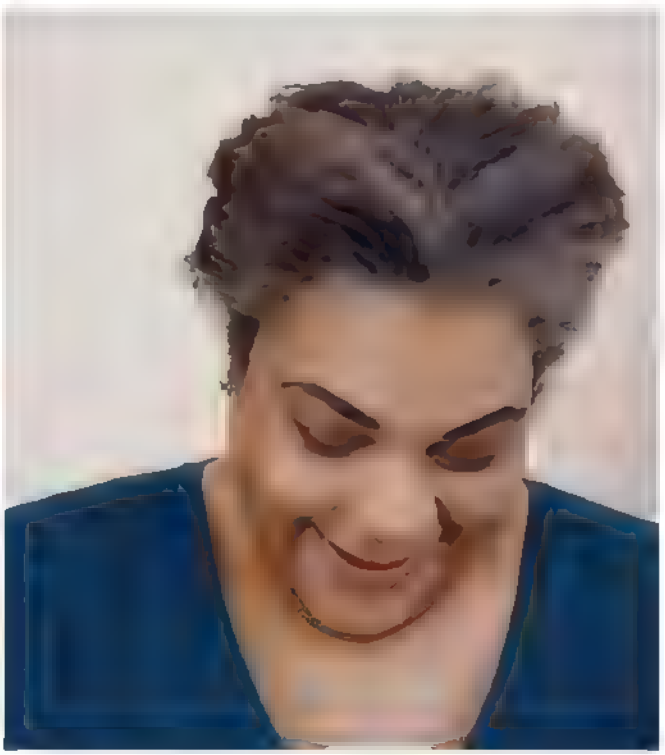
"She comes from this high-status world as a professor, as a woman of that stature, which I think often is a world that talks down to people," says Tamblyn. "But Roxane writes and speaks from the heart. When you read her work, you feel like, 'Oh my God, I am sitting in the living room with this dope-ass woman who is really funny and really smart and I'm learning a lot from her.' But it feels like you're getting to know her on a deeper level too. She's just a really down-to-earth person, and that's a breath of fresh air."

As willing as she is to put herself in the line of fire through telling her story and speaking her truth, Gay recognizes that doing so is not for everyone, particularly at a time when speaking one's truth for the greater good does not necessarily result in change.

"It's women and marginalized people who consistently do things for the greater good, and the greater good tends to be widely indifferent to that," says Gay. "I think it's a personal choice [to tell your own truth]. I think you don't have to."

What she would like to see is more men leading the charge to change the climate.

"Men listen to other men," she says. "They don't listen to women. We clearly see that, so men need to start holding each other accountable and saying, 'You know what? This is unacceptable. You don't get to be out in the world acting any old way.' And until men hold one another accountable, I don't think we're going to see any change at all."



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Back at the shoot, *Lemonade* continues to fill the room as Gay gets her hair and makeup done. She's still bantering with the photo team when the opening strains of another song come on — the taut, insistent beat of "Sorry."

As I get up to leave, the chorus begins. It could be a direct response from Gay to anyone who would ask her to keep her truths, in all their pain, rage, humor and complexity, to herself.

Sorry, I ain't sorry
Sorry, I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
No no, hell nah. ■

Doing anything later?

Might be doing this again!

RACHEL
ASHLEY
JOHNSON
Photography by TRUC TRUONG

Stunning Playboy Model Rachel Ashley Johnson is a petite and all natural beauty living her best life and making her dreams reality. Rachel Ashley Johnson is a firm believer in the law of attraction and enjoys traveling the world

Tell us something surprising about you?
Something surprising about me would be that I danced ballet for ten years I danced with the San Francisco and Moscow Ballet

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Yes absolutely! I was thrilled! This is a huge accomplishment. I've always dreamt of shooting for Playboy and now it's finally happened

What inspires you?
My inspiration comes from making my dreams into reality. I'm a firm believer in the law of attraction and the golden rule

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modeling?
I decided to pursue a career in modeling after the end of a relationship I decided to make my dreams into reality and pursue what I really wanted to do. I love modeling it is my passion and I feel as though I'm creating art. Modeling comes very naturally to me and I love it.

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
I look up to Kate Upton she's so successful and classy I love the way she carries herself
She's definitely inspirational

What are some of your hobbies?
My hobbies are traveling, exploring the world, sightseeing, boating, hiking, yoga, music, shopping, and wine tasting

Name three things on your bucket list?
The top three things on my bucket list would be to go Egypt to see the pyramids. Secondly would be to go to Paris to see the Eifel tower and go shopping Third would be to go on African safari

Turn-ons.
Turn-ons would be a strong emotional connection, genuine natural chemistry, someone down to earth and easy going I like someone who has a passion for life and traveling Someone who appreciates the finer things life has to offer

Turn-offs.
Turn-offs would be rudeness, stingy, egoistical, aggressive and being narrow minded

Describe your perfect date.
My perfect date would be enjoying a glass of wine with a spectacular view of the ocean I enjoy ocean views and also rooftop lounges

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
A world capital I would like to visit would be Moscow, Russia. I've flown through Russia but I haven't had the opportunity to explore Russia and go sightseeing there. There is so much history and so much to see there

What is your mantra?
I live by these golden rules

- One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself positive or directive form
- One should not treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated in a negative way
- What you wish upon others, you wish upon yourself empathic or responsive form

WHEN SPIRITUALITY *Goes Viral*

He appears on the screen, calling from an undisclosed location.

BY **JESSE HYDE**

His name is Bentinho Massaro, and as far as young New Age leaders go, he's a sensation. I've been watching his YouTube videos, which have netted more than 10 million collective views. He's on a stage in Sedona or Maui or his native Netherlands. A crowd of hundreds gathers at his feet. He sits in the lotus position, hands folded in his lap. He is blond and delicately handsome, and he speaks with a slight accent. He wears mostly loosefitting yoga clothes, as if he might break into a flawless downward dog at any moment, and he exudes an energy that his followers, whom he calls Wanderers, seem to find magnetic, even hypnotic.

He agrees to talk with me on Skype about his teachings and the controversy that surrounds him. He is going to scan me, he says, to get a sense of my intentions.

Massaro is part of a new generation of spiritual teachers who use social media to spread their message and gain followers. There are shamans who lead retreats for Silicon Valley executives and swamis who can read your chakras over Skype. Their ranks include Audrey Kitching, the pinkhaired model and crystal-healing muse with more than 500,000 followers across Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, and Amy Woodruff, the kundalini yoga instructor who rocketed to fame after posting a picture of herself doing a headstand while breast-feeding her daughter.

At 30 years old, Massaro is a master of digital spirituality. He has a slickly designed website offering online courses on enlightenment, a YouTube channel with more than 75,000 subscribers and a Facebook page with more than 300,000 likes.

Like Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh with his scores of Rolls-Royces, Massaro seems to have no interest in eschewing the good life. He posts photos of himself hanging out with his girlfriend, free-diving off the coast of Bali and rock climbing in Colorado. He can be seen admiring his ripped physique and savoring whiskey and cigars, all of it interspersed with messages of positive affirmation and limitless possibility.

In the world of New Age teachers, he was the next big thing. And then something called the Sedona Experiment II went horribly wrong.

There was a death, a police investigation, physical threats. Online, his critics called him "Steve Jobs meets Jim Jones," a reference to the notorious Peoples Temple leader who led a mass murder-suicide in 1978. Massaro tells me this insinuation is absurd. He is misunderstood. He is on a mission to help civilization upgrade. And because he is a disrupter, blowback is inevitable. He asks why I want to write about him. "It's going to take a lot of your time and you're going to delve into a world that perhaps is fairly new to you," he says.

I explain that I grew up in the Mormon Church and that after experiencing a crisis of faith a few years ago I've been on a spiritual journey of my own. I'm intrigued by his teachings and want to learn how he gained his devout following.

He nods slowly, and I sense he understands me, even though we're a generation apart and have little in common. There's a look of compassion in his eyes. I find my skepticism dissipating ever so slightly. And then he starts gazing at me with an intensity I've seen him summon in his videos. When he does this onstage, it can last for 10 minutes, sometimes longer. A slight smile will appear on his lips, as if he has sensed the aura of whomever he's gazing at, and it pleases him. With me, it lasts for only a moment, but I wonder what he sees within me.

I tell him I'd like to meet him and his team, who help him with graphic design and video production. I want to understand why people have abandoned lovers, homes and careers to follow him. I want to understand instagrammable spirituality.

I also want to know if he's a misunderstood teacher, as he insists, or a cult leader for the digital age, espousing dangerous concepts that can lead people to their deaths.

What I don't tell him is that I'm also wondering if he can help me.

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According to Massaro, his origin story goes something like this: He was born and raised in a middle-class neighborhood of Amsterdam, not far away from its famous canals, tulips and 15th century homes. His father worked for an energy company and his mother taught elementary school, and they endured what Massaro, an only child, describes as "bouts of poverty," when he sometimes went hungry.

From an early age he felt he was special, extraordinary even, both blessed and burdened with a message he had to share with the world. He says that at school he was known affectionately as "the weird kid" with one of the highest IQs in class even though he was a lazy student. He was more interested in telekinesis. He tells me he would spend class periods trying to move straws or pieces of foil across his desk with his mind.

His parents were undergoing a spiritual awakening of their own thanks in part to the Silva Method, a self-help meditation program popular in the 1960s. They believed they could use it to train their minds to control objects, view distant locations and, eventually, connect with a higher intelligence. They enrolled Massaro in a children's course, which he says he quickly mastered.

"It resonated as home for me," Massaro

Massaro engages with a participant at a retreat in Maui, Hawaii

says, "I always knew I'm a superhero. I always knew everyone can do anything they want."

He began reading Deepak Chopra, ancient scripture and yogic philosophy. He became particularly fascinated by *The Law of One*, a series of books purportedly conceived by a nonhuman intelligence named Ra. He also absorbed the basic teachings of nonduality, or the idea that the universe is one substance and we're all a part of it, whether we call that substance awareness, consciousness or even God — a concept at the core of some Buddhist strains and everything from Jewish kabbalah and Christian mysticism to *The Matrix*. Visions of India began popping into his head, and at 18, he and his then girlfriend decamped for Rishikesh, the birthplace of yoga and much of the Beatles' "White Album." He lived in the country for six months, riding rickshaws, hopping from one hostel to another, meeting with swamis, and practicing yoga and meditation.

"It was a Buddha-like quest," he tells me. "The Buddha said at some point after seeking, 'I won't get up from under this tree until I'm enlightened, until I've found what I'm looking for,' and it was kind of a similar result."

Not long after he got back to the Netherlands, Massaro began posting videos on YouTube, sharing what he'd found. He quickly gained a following because of what he describes as his ability to distill centuries of wisdom into concepts anyone can understand.

"For the advanced seeker I am a breath of fresh air, or the teachings are a breath of fresh air, because they've never heard it so clearly before," he tells me. "If you had researched all these philosophies and practices — anyone who has agrees that my teaching is genius."

His fame spread to the United States, and in 2011 he was invited to speak at the Science and Nonduality Conference, an event that draws such New Age luminaries as Chopra and Adyashanti. A few years later he was featured on an audio series produced by Sounds True, the company that publishes the audio and video teachings of Eckhart Tolle. But the more time Massaro spent with other gurus, the more disillusioned he became.

"I had attained greater clarity and purity of mind than most of these other teachers," he says. "Now it was like, Well, wait a second — it's up to me. It was really powerful to realize that if I want to change the world, if I want to upgrade spirituality, I'm the one who has to do that."

Massaro says he clashed with other spiritual teachers because he was drifting outside standard nondual teachings and talking about the law of attraction, popularized by the book The Secret, which holds that we have the power to bring into our lives anything we focus on, good or bad. As Massaro started blending that idea with Eastern philosophies such as Advaita Vedanta, he says he was disinvited from conferences. His Sounds True interview was taken down.

"I ALWAYS KNEW I'M A SUPERHERO. I ALWAYS KNEW EVERYONE CAN DO ANYTHING THEY WANT."

But none of this slowed his rise. By 2016, videos he'd posted on YouTube were getting thousands of views. He had moved to Boulder, Colorado, which has been described as the "New Age's Athens." Seated at the base of the eastern scarp of the Rockies, the city is home to the first Buddhist-inspired college in America. It's the sort of place where you'll find ads for psychic reprogrammers and past-life-regression experts. Massaro rented an office downtown and assembled a team who understood video editing, web design and social media. He launched Bentinho Massaro TV, a subscription-based repository of his teachings. The followers he gained online were encouraged to attend his retreats, which have cost $5,000 for nine days.

In early 2017 Massaro decided to move his operation to Sedona, Arizona, another New Age mecca. Wanderers who had quit jobs to follow him to Boulder moved with him, fanning out across the city to rent homes and attend his regular talks, which he also live-streamed, at the Sedona Creative Life Center.

He started hosting retreats in luxurious resorts, surrounded by followers so devoted he says he had to hire bodyguards and lay down a rule: If he was wearing sunglasses between sessions, attendees shouldn't approach him. The whiskey-and-cigars posts began to dot his feed. He says his team was bringing in up to $120,000 a month.

As Massaro's following grew, his teachings became more grandiose. In one interview he said he didn't want to have children because he already had 7 billion of them; "The people of this world are my children."

He claimed that he had the power to teleport, levitate and move mountains — that he was an "upper-density spirit" who had descended to the earth to help civilization upgrade. "My vision is to buy a large, amazing piece of land and to start a new city of sorts with all of you and a teaching like mine as a focal point," he said during a talk at the Sedona Creative Life Center. "There's amazing potential to live in a new way and to create a little pocket that is an initial example of what is possible for all of humanity. So I see it as a flower popping up through the mud."

In the fall of 2017 Massaro started to talk about a new retreat, called the Sedona Experiment II. He had already held the first Sedona Experiment with about a dozen of his most devoted disciples. To market the sequel, which he wanted to expand to more than 100 followers, he bought the domain name sedonaexperiment.com and posted a short video trailer in which he explains that he's shifting his followers' "sense of identity from being human to being not human" and eventually arriving at a place called "infinite consciousness."

By this point, the Sedona police had begun to get complaints. Sedona is a small city of about 10,000 people, and it relies heavily on tourism. Of its nearly 3 million annual visitors, some come to browse the downtown galleries or to hike or mountain bike, but thousands come to visit the vortices, get their auras photographed or cleanse their chakras. Sedona has also attracted its share of fanatics and cult leaders. In 2010 there was a noticeable drop in visitors after a celebrated guru named James A. Ray presided over a sweat-lodge ceremony near Sedona that had resulted in three deaths the previous year.

According to reporting by *The Arizona Republic*, there were now similar complaints about Massaro. Someone told the Sedona police chief that Massaro encouraged his followers to live on nothing more than grape juice for weeks at a time. (The

Sedona police declined PLAYBOY's interview request.) He had encouraged his followers to cut off ties to friends and family if they got in the way of enlightenment, and to look forward to their own deaths. "Don't fear death, be excited about it," he says with a smile in one video. He said he was unafraid of his own death and once wrote, "Looking forward to death makes you truly come alive."

"Wake up to something important," he says in another clip. "Otherwise, kill yourself. Make that agreement every day. You either kill yourself or you dedicate yourself to something important." Before long, a detective would be repeating those words back to him.

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A few days before the second Sedona Experiment, an article was published on the blogging platform Medium by an activist and writer named Be Scofield, who had infiltrated Massaro's inner circle. "Tech bro guru has arrived," Scofield writes. "The OS has been upgraded. Cult 2.0 is upon us."

Scofield traces how Massaro had used start-up principles and "growth-hacker marketing" to build a New Age empire. His product was spiritual ideas, and using Facebook and YouTube he could test out this product at no cost, noting what resonated by analyzing clicks. Massaro had also founded something called Trinfinity, Scofield writes, a murky entity that sounds like something from the mind of L. Ron Hubbard or a Batman comic. Trinfinity Corp. had a master plan that would be executed in four phases. It would start with apps, virtual-reality machines, an astral-projection inducer, film and TV studios and a publishing platform, and would culminate with Trinfinity City.

As the second Sedona Experiment began, Massaro took to the stage to address the allegations raised in the article, which included video snippets of Massaro yelling at a female follower and a Facebook post advancing conspiracy theories like Pizzagate.

"It has no context for me," he said of the cult label. "It feels so empty and meaningless. Like, okay, great. Yeah. We're a cult. It doesn't change what we are."

He told those who had gathered for the 12-day retreat that a better label would be a "social memory complex." In the coming days they would grow so close that the electromagnetic fields of their consciousnesses would merge and they would become one, bound by the bliss of enlightenment, and "penetrate the Absolute."

On the seventh day of the retreat, according to the *Republic*, two detectives showed up at Massaro's house to ask him about one of the participants in the Sedona Experiment. His name was Brent Wilkins, a 34-year-old former tennis pro who had drifted in and out of Massaro's inner circle. According to what Wilkins's parents told police, he had quit his job back East and moved to Boulder to follow Massaro. For two years he poured everything he had into finding enlightenment through Massaro's teachings. At one point he had come home at his parents' urging and admitted to a psychiatrist that he sometimes thought of hurting himself. He spent a week in a local psych ward and vowed to stay in Virginia when he got out. They hired a cult-extraction specialist, but before long Wilkins had returned to Boulder.

"I want to go back to your words," detective Chris Stevens said, " 'Wake up and do something important. Otherwise, just kill yourself.' "

"Right," Massaro said.

Massaro recalled that Wilkins had met with him at a party prior to the retreat and expressed his doubts about participating in it. He sometimes had "freak moments" at retreats. But Wilkins was always swinging from doubt to certainty. At the end of the conversation, Wilkins had held Massaro to his chest.

"He's confused, right?" Stevens asked, his voice sharp on a recording later obtained and reported on by The Arizona Republic. "He's trying to figure out his life?"

Massaro voiced his agreement.

"And he's not doing anything? What do you think might be the outcome?"

"Um, not that. But I understand. I understand."

And then Stevens told Massaro that Wilkins had killed himself.

"No," Massaro said softly.

Wilkins had been found at the bottom of a 225-foot cliff in Sedona. In his pocket they'd found a name tag: *The Sedona Experiment II Participant*.

As police decided whether to charge Massaro, the empire he had built began to teeter. (Sedona police ultimately did not press charges.) Followers turned on him. Threatening messages appeared online. He no longer felt welcome in the community that had been his home base for years.

It was as though a dark cloud had moved into Sedona, he tells me, "like a scary movie." The energy had shifted there, and he no longer felt welcome. And so, after careful consideration with his two lovers at the time, they went on the run, revealing their whereabouts and what was next to only a handful of people.

• • •

At the time of our first Skype session, Massaro appears to be still on the run.

There are pictures of him in Hawaii and the Netherlands, in Egypt in front of the pyramids and in the misty jungles of Colombia, meeting with a reclusive tribe called the Kogis. The captions on his Instagram feed are vague, perhaps intentionally so. At times it seems he's ready to retire, and then a post surfaces in which everything he once prophesied still seems possible.

In late August he invites me to visit him in Boulder, suggesting a trendy restaurant off Pearl Street, the downtown pedestrian mall where you can pay for someone to balance and align your energies, buy pot or get smashed among rowdy University of Colorado coeds, who have just arrived for the fall semester.

I've been waiting for half an hour, at a table Massaro has reserved in the back, when I see him enter. He is of average build and carries himself with confidence, scanning the room as though he owns the place. He's flanked by three staffers, the Wanderers I've heard so much about. There's a tall and willowy blonde who left an international modeling career to follow him, a recent University of Colorado grad who helps with writing and graphic design, and an aspiring filmmaker from Florida who helps with videos. I've seen all of them on Massaro's Instagram feed.

"I'VE ASKED MYSELF, IF BUDDHA OR JESUS LIVED TODAY, WOULD THEY HAVE A FACEBOOK PAGE?"

A November 2017 post promoting the Sedona Experiment II and tagged, in part, #selfrealizationschool and #realizetheabsolute

Over the next two hours, as the members of his team explain why they've abandoned careers or moved across the country to follow Massaro, their leader sits near the head of the table with a pleased look on his face, cutting in here and there to explain some esoteric spiritual concept. I sense him watching me as he sips his cocktail.

I had expected Massaro to be aloof, that it might take some work to get around the facade of an upper-density spiritual teacher, but in person the so-called tech bro guru seems mostly like a bro. He peppers his conversation with references to comedies like *Wedding Crashers*, laughs about the time he tried out for the Netherlands version of American Idol and forgot the lyrics to an Elton John song, and seems delighted to learn little biographical details I tease out about his team.

If he's scanning me again, I'm scanning him too, wondering if he really believes he descended from another planet to help Earth upgrade, as he says in one of his posts. To me, he seems nothing like the sociopathic narcissist who reportedly once told a girlfriend she was disrupting his flow into eternal bliss.

He muses that maybe the best way to spread his message is entirely online. Inperson retreats are too messy. People always approach him between the sessions, a tendency both exhausting and tedious.

"It always feels — I wouldn't say scary," he says. "But I can't be personally responsible for every person in a group. I don't know where they come from, their issues."

I ask if he's referring to Brent Wilkins.

"No, not at all. I don't feel responsible for his death. I've always felt this. I know I'm not responsible ultimately. They're responsible for signing up for the retreat, their meditations, how they interpret things I say."

Before long, their attention turns to me. I describe my path out of Mormonism and how it led to a dark period during which I felt an existential void and lack of any sense of meaning. The Wanderers, all in their 20s, nod and smile as if they've been there too and know the secret to my wandering.

Massaro suggests we continue the conversation the next day but instructs me not to call him before noon. He usually stays up all night, he explains, because that's when the "world goes to sleep. All the brains quiet. I can feel the conscious mind drop into the subconscious mind."

We meet the next afternoon at a coffee shop in a suburb of Boulder, where Massaro and his team are living with the parents of one of his followers. He tells me they're looking for a place where they can all live and work together. Without his team, he doesn't seem quite as upbeat, and I think of something I've heard, that he's rarely without at least one of them by his side. Or maybe he's just groggy after staying up all night.

He dodges questions about what they're up to, saying he can't really get into it, and explains how difficult the past year has been for him.

"Friends were turning against me. People were threatening me and my loved ones," he says. "I'm sure famous people get this all the time, like threats on social media, comments, messages, messaging through our site. 'You deserve what's coming for you. Just wait and see.' Or 'You're responsible for Brent's death.'"

On Wilkins's suicide, he offers this: "Maybe it was a powerful moment. I don't know. Maybe it was a super powerful moment. I don't recommend suicide for anyone, but I also don't judge it. I think sometimes, for some people, it is a powerful decision." I ask if he has ever considered suicide.

"Oh yeah," he replies. "I think every sane person has contemplated suicide every once in a while." Reality is an illusion, he reminds me. Our bodies are too. It's like a video game.

"You're playing a video game. You know it's not really you, it's not ultimately real. The video game ends. If you fall down a cliff, you still exist. You just walk away from the game console and you're fine."

I came here wondering if I could find a sense of peace outside organized religion, trying to be as open as I could to a new sort of spirituality. In one of our Skype sessions, Massaro agreed that he had tapped into the cultural zeitgeist that allowed him to reach people in a way a traditional spiritual teacher no longer could — especially with millennials, the generation least likely to identify with a religious group, according to a Pew Research Center survey.

"I've asked myself, if Buddha or Jesus lived today, would they have a Facebook page?" Massaro says. Instagram in particular is a medium he finds conducive to spirituality. "The pictures have an energy," he explains. "It's why people stare at gurus in the East: They have a certain power."

He says he shows a life of abundance because otherwise millennials wouldn't click on any of his photos. I admit I find some of this confusing: He talks about overcoming

Massaro leads a guided meditation "on the healing and forgiveness of each other and mankind."

attachment and desire, yet he seems to like nice things.

"Is that really what I like, or is that part of the message?" he asks. He compares himself to a martial artist, responding intuitively to what's coming in. The "collective" likes to see pictures of "an epic life," and so he posts them to draw his followers in.

The more he talks, the more worn out I feel. Maybe I don't want to get to the place where all thinking stops, or to feel eternal bliss, or to get beyond consciousness to "the Absolute," an idea that, no matter how long Massaro talks and what kind of diagrams he draws on the napkin before me, I cannot wrap my head around. I think of something the Buddha said, about how the whole point of non-attachment is to get to a place where you don't really care if you're not in a state of bliss or if you have a toothache or if your life just seems really shitty.

After my Boulder trip I call Naomi Melati Bishop, a writer and self-described millennial hippie who has done Mayan steam baths, traveled 10,000 miles tracking down a mystic and become Facebook friends with her shamans. She acknowledges that social media might be great for raising awareness of things like crystal healing or that studio in Brooklyn that offers shamanic purification rituals, but it can also present an inaccurate picture of what it takes to attain something even close to enlightenment.

"Many of these practices are based in Eastern traditions that are thousands of years old, and when you take it out of that context, people are practicing only slivers of the thing itself, so it becomes fragmented and fractured," she says. "People are simultaneously becoming more enlightened and more lost."

I wonder if Massaro would even exist as a spiritual teacher without Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. I also wonder if he'd be doing any of this if he couldn't post about it and track how many likes he gets.

"Ultimately it's about practicing what you post," Melati Bishop says. "Are you living a lifestyle that's aligned with what you're saying? Would some of us still be meditating if we couldn't prove it online?"

• • •

Massaro stays in touch. He texts me on Whats App to vent about a documentary on YouTube that makes him look like a cult leader, explaining that he allowed the filmmakers access to a retreat he held in the Netherlands thinking they would portray him fairly. Instead, they spliced together snippets of Massaro saying things like "When you stumble upon a point of view that feels good about someone else being raped, are you willing to accept that point of view?"

The video shows him once again confronting the C word: "I don't really have a definition of cult. But you could break it down as Curious and Unconditionally Loving Tribe, C-U-L-T. That would be the positive expression of a cult."

Not long after, I'm alerted to a new post on Facebook, this one by Massaro's ex- girlfriend Jocelyn Daher. She describes how Massaro told her he couldn't have sex with her unless she lost weight because fat suggests stored toxins. She describes three months of eating only fruits and vegetables, dry fasting and working out twice a day. On a related blog post, she describes her time with Massaro as "10 months of complete obliteration of everything I knew myself to be."

His disciples hovered near him, looking for constant approval, Daher writes, but none of them seemed happy, they all seemed lost.

As their relationship progressed, he told her she was preventing him from accessing his "God-self." "I remember one time he said to me that my mind to him was like having 'a fly in the room.' My 'personhood' seemed to be an annoyance and a hindrance to his 'absorption into the all.'"

In the weeks after I meet Massaro, he continues to post affirming messages, encouraging his then 23,000 Instagram followers to stop doubting themselves and unlock their potential through forgiveness.

But then something shifts. Massaro's posts begin to take on a menacing edge. The week after Daher's piece, he posts videos on Instagram in which he suggests that most people aren't up to the task of pursuing "real spirituality" and don't know what real love is. He posts a picture of another girlfriend, the former model, saying women who think they're oppressed are living in a fantasy world. It seems like a shot at Daher, who described their relationship as oppressive. He tells his critics to get off his page.

"You're mostly blind," he writes in one post on Instagram around that same period.

"You're ruining your life; no one else is. Most of you are nowhere near who you truly are."

The comments, many of them negative, start to flood his feed.

I think of the last time I saw him, the two of us sitting outside a coffee shop. I asked him if he ever thought about quitting. He did, he said. Sometimes he just wanted to go "sit on a rock in India." But he wasn't like other spiritual teachers. There was something alive in him. "There's a fire, a passion, a devotion that's willing to die for the cause," he'd told me earlier.

He asked me what I think happens when we die, and I told him I wasn't sure. "I used to think it just fades to black," I said. "The light goes off. We cease to exist."

He nodded, and for a brief moment I saw something I hadn't seen in him before — a crack of doubt. He didn't seem like a New Age guru with all the answers or an enlightened being who had achieved upper-level density, whatever that means. We were just two dudes, sitting outside a strip mall in Colorado, sipping coffee and trying to figure out if any of this had any meaning.

"But now I wonder," I said. "Maybe there is something beyond this."

The light returned to his face, and he nodded with excitement, once again the spiritual teacher so many had found online. It seemed he really believed he could help me, that I too could find eternal bliss and that, if I listened long enough, it would all make sense.

I just had to trust him. ■

ALEXA
ORTIZ
Photographed by RYAN DWYER Produced by MAIN STREET PRODUCTIONS
Styled by BRIDGET MARTINEZ

Tell us something surprising about you?
I am super sweet, humble, and down to earth Many people are surprised when they meet me

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
Super excited to shoot with playboy! It is such a blessing to be apart of such a well known and respected company

What inspires you?
My grammy Micky inspires me She is the most positive, loving, caring person I know She worked hard her entire life and inspires me to stay motivated and never give up

Why did you choose to pursue a career in modelling?
I chose to pursue a career in modeling because I recently became intrigued with health, beauty, and fitness. I would to get involved with different organizations that promote confidence for young girls, charities, and fitness events

Who do you look up to in the modelling industry?
I look up to Kendra Wilkinson in the modeling industry. I loved watching the show "girls next door" and she is such a free spirit and never acted like someone she's not She is so funny and I love her tom-boy attitude. I love that she is simply herself and never let anyone or anything change her

What are some of your hobbies?
My hobbies include working out, hiking, playing volleyball, and simply staying active.

Name three things on your bucket list?
- Bathe and feed baby elephants
- Gondola boat ride in Venice, Italy
- Zip lining in Costa Rica

Turn-ons
Neck Kisses, waking up to random roses, massages

Turn-offs
Bad teeth and breath, poor manners

Describe your perfect date.
Dinner & drinks at a cute intimate lounge, followed by a show (I love comedy shows, cirque de soleil show or fight night), a little bit of gambling, preferably blackjack. Then end the night at a strip club, I love making it rain haha.

Which world capital would you most like to visit, and why?
Rome, Italy to see the beautiful architecture

What is your mantra?
Success is the best revenge

TOMMY

The powerhouse actress and star of *What Men Want* (who has gone by the name Cookie both on Empire and

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MICAIAH CARTER**

TARAJI
P. HENSON

ONCE YOU START TALKING, YOU REALIZE THAT MEN AND WOMEN WANT THE SAME GODDAMN THINGS.

Q1: *In What Men Want, you play a woman who is able to hear what men are thinking. Do you actually want to know what men are thinking?*

HENSON: I don't want that. I have too much shit rattling around in my head already. We shouldn't need that anyway. If men were just honest and put their shit on the table, we wouldn't need no voodoo. We need more communication. Once you start talking, you realize that men and women want the same goddamn things: They want someone they can trust with their heart, they want protection, they want security. That's what we all want as humans. It's not deep.

Q2: *The movie's premise is that men think they know everything about women, but we actually have no idea. So what do guys not know about women that we should?*

HENSON: Women get emotional or upset when we're pushed. It doesn't come out of nowhere; it's provoked. Just because I'm emotional doesn't make me crazy. Men have to own their part in that. You have to listen, listen, listen to your woman. It goes both ways: When my man drives me up the wall, I try to think about what happened and what I did to add to it. You've got to be a grown-up to be in a relationship. It can't be "I love you as long as you're doing right by me." Love is "I love you even when you fall. I love you even when I hate your ass. You piss me off, but I made dinner for your stank ass anyway 'cause I love you."

Q3: *You're getting married this summer to former NFL player Kelvin Hayden. Are you ready?*

HENSON: I'm still learning how to be ready. Every day I'm learning how to be better in a relationship. I just found out, in our therapy sessions, that men have fewer words than women. I didn't know that. They run out of words. Because women are emotional, we want to talk through everything. Of course we have more words, we're the communicators. Kelvin, he thinks he's a comedian. Anytime we're in a disagreement or I'm like, "We need to talk about this," he'll look at me and say, "Baby, I done ran out of words." He's joking, but I'm starting to accept that it's true.

Q4: *Speaking of listening to each other, your next film, out in April, is The Best of Enemies, in which you play civil rights activist Ann Atwater, who forms an unlikely friendship with Klan leader C.P. Ellis. Did making this movie make you want to leave your bubble?*

HENSON: I do it through my art. That's why this movie is so important. Me talking to one person is not going to be as effective as the movie, because it takes a big old mirror and says, "Hey, America, look at yourself." Although Atwater was on the right side of history, she had the same intolerance as that man. They were both radical in their beliefs. They had to sit across from each other, look each other in the eye to really see themselves. We all need to get to that point with each other. We need to look at the people we disagree with and say, "You ain't better than me. We're the same person."

Q5: *Atwater couldn't be more physically different from you. What was the biggest challenge in that transformation?*

HENSON: I knew I had to be padded. When I came in for my fitting, the suit they gave me had these perky little tits. I was like, "Um, I don't know if this is gonna work." Physicality is very important to me, especially when I'm taking on somebody who's real. I needed big breasts, the kind that change the way you walk and that you have to think about when you sit. I mean, the boobs on this suit, they were like my boobs. I was like, "Can you all please call Tyler Perry and ask him what Madea got in her boobs?" All the pictures I've seen of Atwater, this woman looked like she ate pork chops, ribs, corn bread, smothered chicken, fatback, neck bones. When she sat down for a meal, those titties got to rest on the table.

Q6: *This is our Freedom of Speech issue. Is there anyone in the world right now you wish would just shut the hell up?*

HENSON: You know who I wish would shut the hell up. He wears a wig and does way too much tanning. [laughs] Just be quiet, just shhh, take a nap. Just put his finger in a muzzle so he won't tweet anymore. Do they have finger muzzles? [both our phones start blaring] Holy crap, is that the president? Oh my God! [checks phone and sees it's an Amber alert] Oh shit, I was about to freak out. I seriously thought that was the president telling us to stop talking about him. I was about to change my name and move somewhere. That is funny as hell. I know they're spying on us. On our phones, on everything. Sometimes I'll say something and Siri will just come alive, and I'm like, "Bitch, I didn't call for you!" I'm going to become Amish, that's what the fuck I'm going to do. Just get all this technology out of my life.

Q7: *You grew up in a rough part of Washington, D.C. Did you ever feel unsafe, or were your parents able to shield you?*

HENSON: It was what it was. You acclimate to your surroundings if you want to survive. My mom was robbed twice, and I was with her both times, once when I was six and again when I was seven. I'm sure she was petrified. It definitely traumatized me. But her strength is what made me feel safe enough to leave the house again and not be afraid. She didn't give me a choice. The next day, she woke me up and said, "Come on, let's go. Time for school." I couldn't believe it. There she was, getting ready for work with a black eye, trying to cover it with makeup, combing over the bald spot where the guy had pulled out one of her plugs. That's strength. She instilled that in me.

Q8: *Did growing up like that give you street smarts?*

HENSON: Not really. Listen, not everybody from the hood got street smarts. I know some dumbass motherfuckers in the hood, let me tell you. [laughs] What gave me street smarts was getting out of the hood. Every weekend, my mom took me to a predominantly white neighborhood in the suburbs to see my cousin Kim. I played with Mary Beth and Karen and Josh, all the kids with the suburban names. It made me well-rounded. You could drop me off anywhere, this little girl from the hood, and I could get along with anybody. That's why I always tell kids, get out of your ZIP code. Education is getting to know other people and other cultures. Most inner-city kids never even get downtown.

Q9: *Were you a rebellious kid, or did you follow the rules?*

HENSON: I followed the rules, because my mother didn't play. She did not play. She put the fear of God into me. And that's what you should do; if you fear your parents, then you ain't going out in the streets acting an ass. The worst I ever screwed up was in seventh grade. I had some girlfriends over, and we started calling phone

sex lines. It was a 999 number. We thought it was like 888 — it's free! So we called these numbers, and then a week later my mom got a phone bill for $600. That's more than she paid in rent! I thought she was going to murder me.

Q10: *You grew up idolizing comedians like Carol Burnett and Richard Pryor. What made their comedy so relatable?*

HENSON: I think it's because so much of comedy comes from trauma. That's what drives me sometimes. I've had a lot of trauma in my life. You gotta laugh to keep from crying. It just felt so important to watch this stuff when I was younger. I remember begging my father, "Please, take me to see Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip!" I was 11. He said, "Okay, but if you tell your mother, this never happened." We got in there, and my dad had a beer and fell straight asleep. I'm sitting watching Pryor talk about dick and pussy. I was mortified. I had to process that shit.

Q11: *On Empire you play a character named Cookie, which was also your nickname in college. How were you first christened as Cookie?*

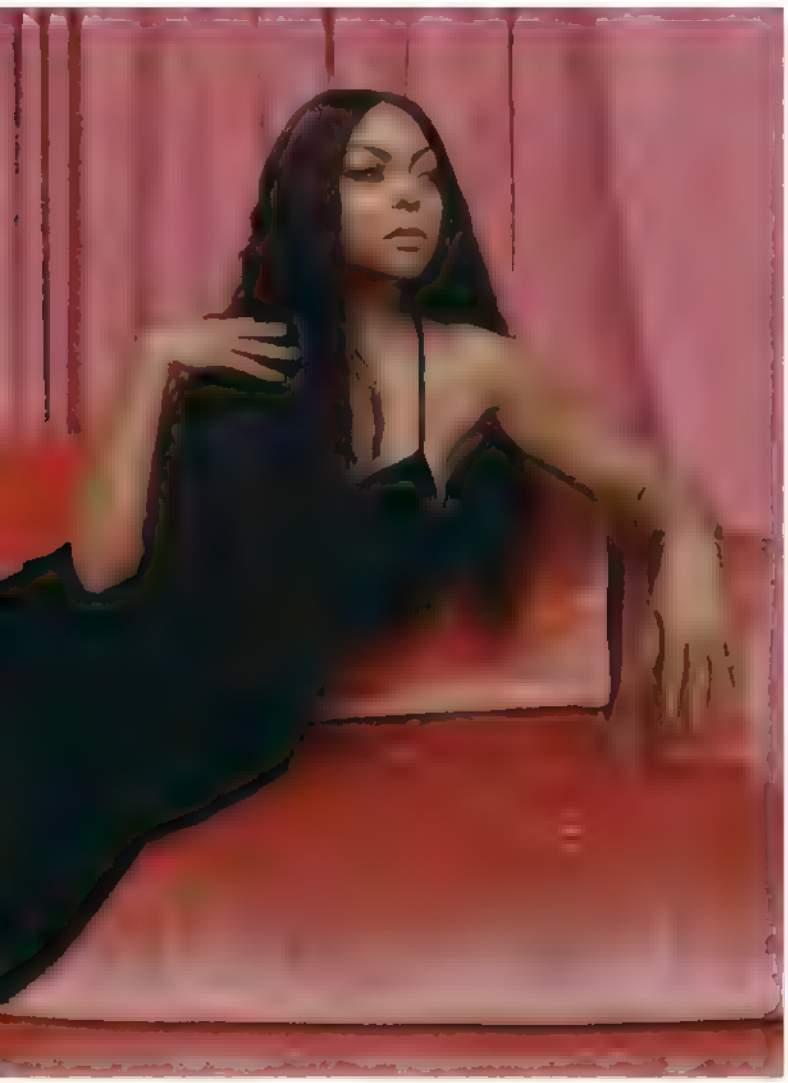
HENSON: One of my dearest friends in the world, Guinea Bennett, and I started this group called Soul Nation, which later became the Dallas nonprofit theater Soul Rep. We were kids who came of age in the 1970s and were proud of it. When we were at Howard University, Guinea and I and all our friends bought our clothes at thrift stores and wore bell-bottoms. We gave each other new names, like Leroy, Tyrone, things that sounded like the 1970s. Mine was Cookie. The full name was Cookie Gwendolyn Jones. I don't know why they picked Cookie for me. I think it's because I reminded Guinea of her aunt Cookie, who was a spitfire. When I got the job on Empire, I called all my college girlfriends and told them, "You will never fucking believe this. I'm Cookie again!"

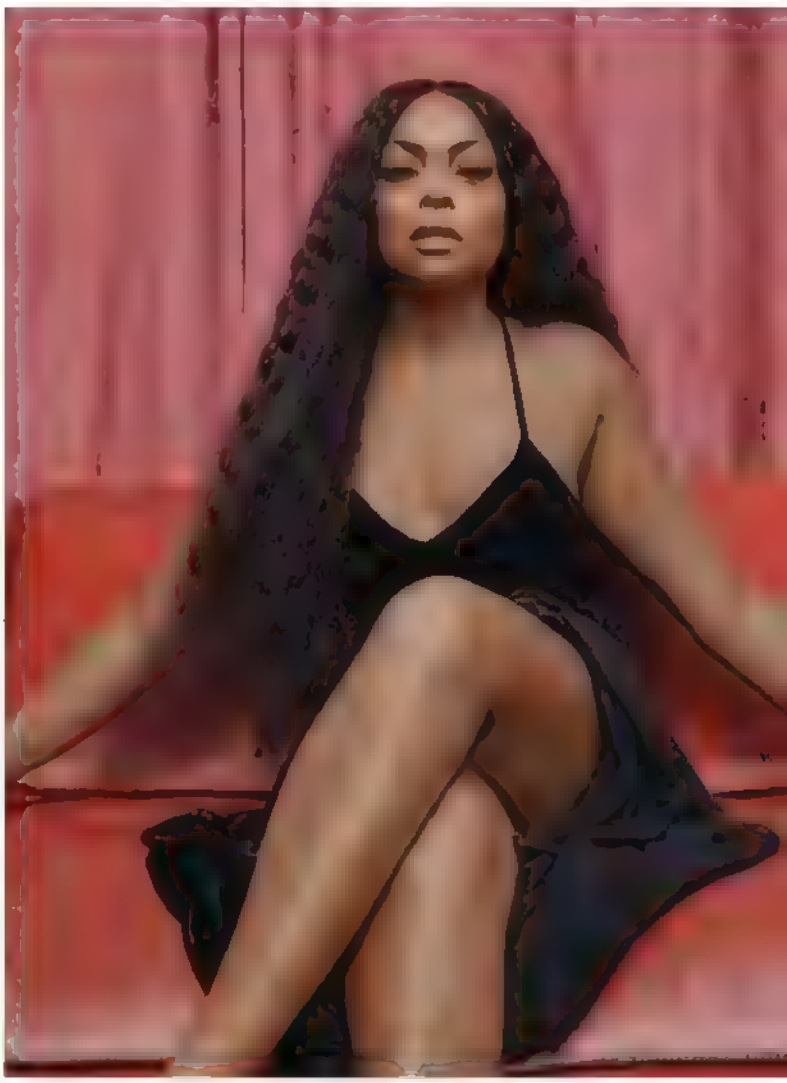
Q12: *You moved to Los Angeles after college with an infant son and 700 bucks in your pocket. Was that as terrifying as it sounds?*

HENSON: It wasn't really. In your 20s, you're not scared. You feel invincible. I was an artist with a dream, and now that I was a mother I felt like it was do or die. Being a parent is what kept me focused. I didn't go to the clubs, even though they say that's how you're supposed to network. I have common sense, and nothing about that seemed right to me. What networking happens at a club where people are inebriated? Tell me, what contracts are being signed? That's stupid. I knew what I had to offer; I just had to find somebody to hear me. Anytime I felt scared, I'd call my dad.

Q13: *What would he tell you?*

HENSON: He would be like, "Don't you dare give up!" He would just be continuously sowing seeds. He used to tell me I'd get an Oscar someday for playing Diana Ross. [laughs] That was his dream. And I believed him. Not about playing





Diana Ross, but being an actor. He knew I could do it, and he wanted it so bad for me. Just by example, he showed me that nothing can hold you back. He was homeless for a while, but he didn't hide that from me. He'd drive by my school in the van he was living in, give me 50 cents and tell me everything was going to be okay. "Watch me, I'm going to bounce back," he told me. "I'm going to get a motorcycle, I'm going to get a house with a garage in the back so I can work from home." He was proof that whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger. If you fall, you just get back up. That's what he did. And in the end, he got his house with the garage and his Harley.

Q14: *Did he live to see your dreams come true?*

HENSON: He saw Hustle & Flow happen, and he saw it get the Oscar nominations. He was like, "You're just getting started. You haven't seen nothing yet." He was gone by the time I sang [the Oscar-nominated song "It's Hard Out Here for a Pimp"] at the Oscars. He died just two weeks prior. I was with him in the room when it happened. He was spitting up blood, and then he died. So that was fresh in my head, and I didn't really have time to process it. I compartmentalized that pain and sort of numbed myself out. I went through the motions. It was surreal being at the Oscars and looking at all the faces out there. Helen Mirren, Nicole Kidman. And I'm up there singing about bitches and hos, trying not to think about my father's face. [pauses as eyes water] As soon as it was over and I went backstage, I just turned off. I had nothing left. They were trying to take me to parties, but I was like, "No, just take me home."

Q15: *Why do you keep the middle initial in your name? Is the P meaningful to you?*

HENSON: My publicist used to tease me about it: "Not to be confused with Taraji S. Henson or Taraji C. Henson." I was like, "Shut up!" Most people feel like their middle name doesn't mean anything, but mine actually does. The P is for Penda, and together with Taraji it means "hope and love" in Swahili. How could I not keep it?

Q16: *It's hard to think of another actress more deserving of her own superhero movie. Have you ever been tempted?*

HENSON: Oh my God, yes! I want to do that so bad! Do you know anyone we can call? There's got to be somebody reading this who can make it happen, one of those superhero movie producers. Hello, I know y'all read PLAYBOY! I don't care what the character is, I'll take it. Just give it to me. I don't give a shit what she looks like, she don't have to be sexy. She can be the bad girl, I don't have to be the hero. I've played a lot of heroes; all my characters are heroes. Cookie is a hero. She's tough, she says the shit you can't say, she stands up for everybody. So I wouldn't mind playing a bad person — like the Joker. They've had like six guys play the Joker already. Time to give a female a chance at it.

Q17: *How are you similar to Cookie? Is there a part of you that could bust up a studio with a baseball bat if somebody crossed you?*

HENSON: My clothes are too expensive, honey. I'm not breaking my nails for that. No, if I'm that mad, I'll see you in court. Or better yet, bye. Just bye. I'll start new and fresh. I don't need the drama. But there's a lot about Cookie I can relate to. I understand her fight for her family. I understand her love for her boys. I have a son. If someone tried to hurt him, I would find the strength to knock you through a brick wall.

Q18: *Your son has struggled with depression, and your dad had depression and PTSD. What gets you out of the emotional quicksand?*

HENSON: I get depressed sometimes, but for me it's not excessive. It's the normal amount of sadness, I think, when there are some days you just can't deal. When I feel it coming, that's when I need to attack my craft. I deal with so much in my performances. Some actors lose themselves in their characters and use it to cover up what they're really feeling. But for me it's just the opposite. Every role, I'm constantly dealing with me, with my issues. It's how I relate to these characters and make them more truthful. It can be very therapeutic. After 20 takes of the same scene, when I'm dealing with these things that are troubling me, it lifts those dark clouds. You go, Wow, I think I'm over that now. I used it and dealt with it, and now it's good. I can move on.

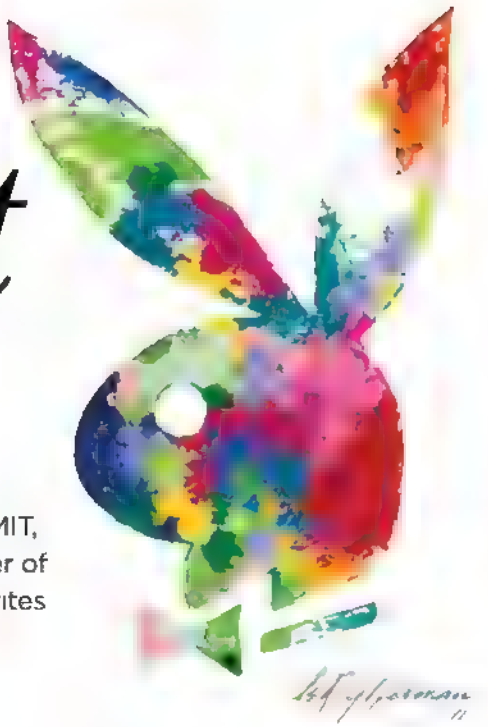
Q19: *Have you ever had a role that nearly killed you emotionally or physically?*

HENSON: I can already tell that the hardest one I'll ever do is playing Emmett Till's mother, and I haven't even finished reading the script yet. John Singleton wrote it, and it's just brutal. Every page is making me ugly-face cry. What's so daunting is you know the outcome. The way John has magically and beautifully written his story, you get to know this kid, and that makes it worse. Why did they have to do this to a child? What threat was he that they had to mutilate him like that? What's so hard is that it gets me thinking about Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown and that nine-year-old kid in Brooklyn a white woman accused of touching her ass. That's what got Emmett Till killed! We're in 2018 and that shit is still happening. I don't know if people are ready for this movie. I don't even know if I am.

Q20: *Do you worry about cultural responsibility? Even if a role is meaty, what if it's perceived as insensitive to the African American community?*

HENSON: What if it's too "hood" or "ghetto"? Yeah, I get that. I worried about that with Cookie when I first got offered the part. I was scared of her. I was like, "What are people going to say?" You have to put the judgment aside. When that fear comes up, it's usually judgment. Everybody may not like these images up on the screen, but, baby, they exist. We didn't pull it out of the sky. If you feel moved by it, go do something. Go to the hood, donate your time so maybe we can start seeing some changes. If people get offended by my characters or feel they're reflecting something back at them they don't want to see, I did my job. I did it so well that it hurt your feelings. [*laughs*] But don't beat me up. Don't kill the messenger. ■

Rabbit TALES



From Warhol's Factory to a Texas highway to a research lab at MIT, the Rabbit Head has inspired artists of every ilk from every corner of the globe for 65 years and counting. Here's a warren of our favorites

BY **LIZ SUMAN**

A few weeks before PLAYBOY's first issue was due at the printer, Hugh Hefner and graphic designer Arthur Paul set out to create a symbol to represent the nascent publication's visual identity.

"I wanted it to be something so simple that when you made it larger you could do many things with it," the late Paul recalled in a 2018 documentary about his profound impact on the relationship between art and publishing.

But back in 1953, PLAYBOY's founding art director had no clue that the sophisticated, mischievous bow-tied rabbit with a cocked ear that he'd drafted in under an hour would become arguably the most recognizable silhouette in the world.

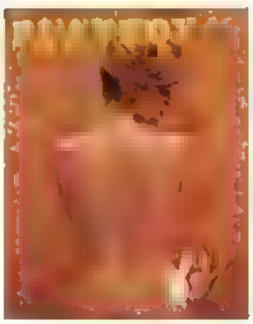
"If I'd had any idea how important that little Rabbit was going to be," Paul said, "I probably would have redrawn him a dozen times.... As it was, I did one drawing and that was it."

One take was all it took. The symbol made its cover debut on the magazine's third issue (having graced the interior of the first two). And since the 1960s, it has appeared — sometimes prominently, often cleverly hidden — on nearly every cover. (A careful scan of this story will reveal the first Rabbit to hide within PLAYBOY's pages. Hint: It's not one of LeRoy Neiman's Femlins.) The Rabbit's reach quickly extended beyond the magazine. In 1959, a letter mailed from New York addressed with only the symbol was delivered to Playboy's Chicago headquarters, by 1964, the Society of Typographic Arts had ranked it among the top logos ever designed in the United States.

From Andy Warhol's immediately recognizable red rendition (opposite page) to Neiman's delicate expressionist version (above; featured on a 1991 Christmas card and previously unpublished), the Rabbit Head continues to serve as a blank canvas for artists nearly seven decades after Paul executed his "simple" idea.

Cover Stories

1956
April 1956 was the first time PLAYBOY's rakish ambassador graced a cover prominently and alone (and in reverse), signifying that PLAYBOY didn't require bare skin or big names to sell magazines.



1960
Paul's inventive art direction set PLAYBOY apart. Example: This Don Bronstein photo reimagined by an actual puzzle maker inspired a jigsaw series that gave readers a new way to take the Rabbit home.

1968
The art department infused this cover with the spirit of the 1960s — and teased a pictorial called The Provocative Art of Body Painting — by brushing a psychedelic Rabbit onto model Sharon Kristie.

1971
Darine Stern is celebrated as the first African American to appear solo on a PLAYBOY cover. Her Rabbitstyled throne inspired a perch for future cover models Lindsay Lohan and Marge Simpson.

1971
"When you got the phone call early in your career it meant you were going somewhere," one artist said of longtime associate art director Kerig Pope, who cocreated this simple, elegant cover.

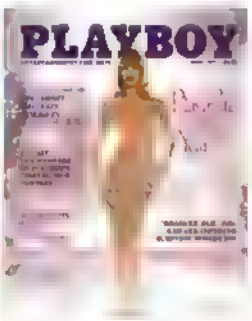
Memorable Muses

SEXUAL SURREALISM
In the early 1970s, PLAYBIY asked Salvador Dalí to conceptualize his erotic fantasies, then dispatched staff photographer Pompeo Posar to the small Spanish village of Cadaqués to help the artist realize them. As you can see, our Rabbit with the support of a blonde quintet plays a central role in Dalí's escapist visions. The artist's goal for the exercise, which was unveiled in a 1974 pictorial, was as clear as his fantasies were surreal: "The meaning of my work is the motivation that is of the purest money. What I did for is very good and your payment is equal to the task."

XRAY OF THE '80S
What do Marilyn Monroe, Campbell's soup cans and the Playboy Rabbit have in common? By 1986, all three icons had joined the ranks of subjects cranked off the assembly line of Andy Warhol's Factory. "I've got bunnies on the brain," he said of the assignment for PLAYBOY's January 1986 anniversary issue. The piece would be one of Warhol's last major works before his death, and no Rabbit better captures the opulence and commercialism of the decade than the artist's stylish double-exposed version, which features bold slashes of cotton-candy pink and neon purple colliding on a lipstick-red canvas.

HOP ART
Prolific pop artist Keith Haring brought his abstract renderings of playful characters and progressive social ideas to PLAYBOY's pages several times in the 1980s. *Bunny #2*, dubbed *Bunny on the Move* by the artist, is a rerelease of a neverpublished cover, part of a series commissioned by PLAYBOY in 1986 four years before the artist's death.

1976
"Have you ever noticed how your Rabbit resembles a butterfly?" mused Vladimir Nabokov in a 1968 letter to Hef. A drawing by the novelist eptopterist led to this cover by pinup artist Dennis Magdich



1979
Awardwinning costumer Bob Mackie has dreamed up sequindrenched gowns for everyone from Cher to Barbie to PMOY Monique St. Pierre, who donned this silver one for our June 1979 cover

1988
Robert Hoppe superimposed the Rabbit onto this dreamy purpleandplatinum specimen of the glamorous art deco cityscapes that made him Hollywood's go-to poster and set designer

1994
"His paintings are like drugs," Jeff Koons said of mentor Ed Paschke's creations. "They affect you neurologically" Chicago artist Paschke constructed this neon Rabbit for our 40th anniversary.

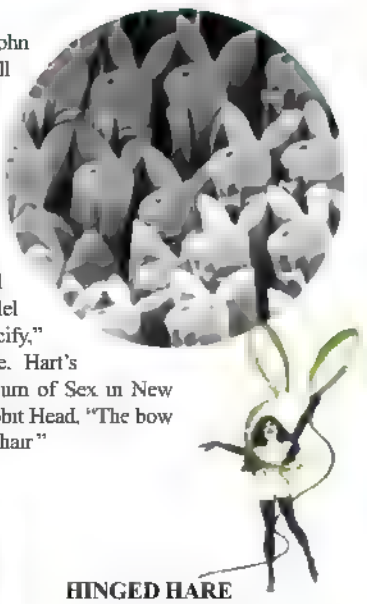
2011
Playboy Poland, one of PLAYBOY's 22 international counterparts, has published at least seven Rabbit Head covers since 1992. This buttonpushing digital image graced its February 2011 issue

— *The Rabbit Reimagined* —

CUBISTCOLLAGE
British artist Andrew Hewkin created this never-before-published Rabbit for Playboy's Chicago headquarters in 1991. In addition to a clear affinity for Picasso, Hewkin's mixed-media interpretation stemmed from a once-in-a-lifetime trip to Vietnam in the spring of 1991. Hewkin tells PLAYBOY from his London studio, "I travelled all around and developed a new dimension to my work using collage and works on paper. Hence, the design for the Rabbit Head was influenced heavily by my travels in a war zone that had defeated the USA."

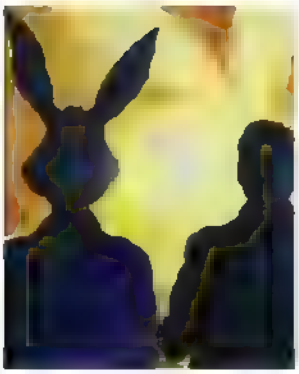
BAS'S BUNNY
This radiant Rabbit was painted by elusive Dutch multimedia artist Bas van Reek in 1992. It's undoubtedly one of our favorite fine art depictions, but its backstory is somewhat of a mystery. Few details are known about the piece or the man who created it.

CHEMICAL BOND
In 2007, PLAYBOY reader John Hart had a big idea about a small thing. As an experiment, Hart, an MIT researcher specializing in nanostructures, created a quarter-millimeter-wide Rabbit Head–shaped carbon nanotube by baking a silicon wafer in a high-temperature furnace containing carbon gas. "A chemical reaction draws up millions of parallel nanotubes in any shape you specify," Hart told PLAYBOY at the time. Hart's creation, now housed in the Museum of Sex in New York City, is the world's tiniest Rabbit Head. "The bow ties are about the width of a human hair."



HINGED HARE
Self-taught American sculptor Ernest Trova spent more than two months creating this seventy-four-foot stainless-steel Rabbit Head for PLAYBOY in 1997, and the heavy hinged hare now greets guests from the lobby of the company's world headquarters in Los Angeles. The sculpture, which features a flappable ear and bow tie, is the only known kinetic version of the Rabbit.

PLAYBOY MARFA
In the summer of 2013, Neville Wakefield, Playboy's then creative director for special projects, tapped artist Richard Phillips to create a temporary roadside installation outside Marfa, Texas. Public response to the project, which centered on the world's tallest Rabbit Head, was decidedly mixed. Countless #PlayboyMarfa selfies flooded the internet, and Phillips made a convincing case for the piece as a visual reconciliation of the brand's legacy with its future; locals deemed it an eyesore packaged as art. Love it or hate it, the piece elicited an undeniably provocative conversation about the line between art and advertising.



THE POWER OF ONE
Pop artist and January 1996 Playmate Victoria Fuller created The Power of One after viewing a production of the Pulitzer Prize–winning play *Harvey*. "The play was about a man who had an invisible friend who was a big rabbit," says Fuller. "Mr Playboy, the Rabbit Head and Hef himself are all Hef to me. Today I see this piece as the spirit of Hef and how the power of one man created such an iconic brand."

ROGER RABBIT
Roger Brown, an Alabama-born artist associated with the Chicago imagists, had a lifelong appreciation for Southern folk art and functional, handmade art objects. He created this five-foot-tall painted wooden Rabbit for Playboy's Chicago offices in 1992

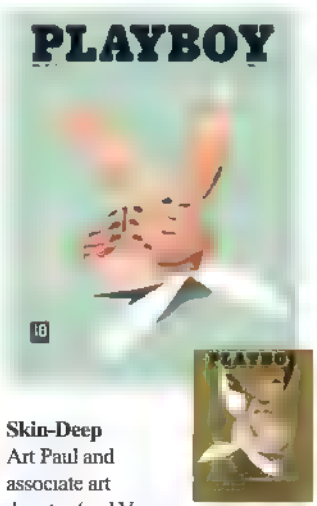
ROCK THE RABBIT
Each year from 2007 to 2011, Playboy tapped some choice musical artists to remix its logo for a recurring campaign called Rock the Rabbit. The impressive lineup included Duran Duran, MGMT, Daft Punk, Iggy Pop and dozens more. English electronic band Hot Chip is behind this playful abstract reimagining, which was featured on a T-shirt

Rabbit Relations

Bathing Beauties
Our cheeky July 1966 cover (inset) was shot by staff photographer Larry Gordon on a faux beach in Chicago. Forty-seven summers later, the sexy sandy shot inspired Tony Kelly's aquatic configuration (July/August 2013). It features 25 synchronized swimmers, including Olympians and Vegas performers — to date the most women ever gathered to appear on our U.S. cover

Elegant Erté
The Rabbit kicked off 1987 on a celebratory note with one of the magazine's most striking covers (inset), an original piece by Erté, the Russian art deco pioneer renowned for his exquisite costumes for Paris's Folies Bergère (and once, famously, Dutch courtesan and spy Mata Hari). Playmate of the Year Stacy Sanches reenacted Erté's romantic vision in 1996

Human Hares
Playmate of the Year Donna Michelle a former New York City Ballet dancer created the first human Rabbit Head in 1964 (inset). Flash forward four decades to futuristic pinup artist Hajime Sorayama's version for the September 2003 cover of *Playboy Japan*. "My longings were not so much carnal as they were an admiration of women as goddesses," he said of his love of pinup.



Skin-Deep
Art Paul and associate art director (and Vargas biographer) Reid Austin designed this faux cutout cover (inset), photographed by Pompeo Posar and featuring Playmate Kathy Douglas, for PLAYBOY's eighth anniversary issue in December 1961. *Playboy Philippines* presented a more risqué interpretation of the concept for its March/April 2015 issue.

JEN
WILKE
Photography by ARTHUR ST. JOHN
Edited by SASHA K. ARAUJO & MARGARET GUTIERREZ

How often do you work out?
I try to work out at least 5 times a week, 30 mins to 3 hours each time, based on what I'm doing that day I'm always switching things up so that my body doesn't get stuck in a routine, I've read that doing so will help you achieve the goals that you want, and it seems to be doing the trick for me

What's your favorite exercise? What's your least favorite?
You can find me in the pool during the winter, and during summer, so swimming wins hands-down as my favorite exercise. My least favorite has gotta be lifting weights, and that's why you will rarely see me doing it haha.

Describe your perfect man.
My perfect man would be responsible, happy, positive, kind, calm, collective, clean, and also have goals. I will make it worth his time, so I expect the same in return :)

Describe your perfect date.
A perfect date for me would be anything one on one, in an intimate setting. May we can cook, watch some netflix, and since we are all adults here, see if he's a good kisser

Favorite body part on you? Favorite body part on a man?
I'm super fond of my long legs, they stay in shape since I'm an avid runner, they are silky smooth due to laser hair removal, and they make my booty look fantastic in short dresses.
I think that the Adams apple on a man is dead sexy, another super hot trait would have to be his eyes. I love being able to see the emotion behind them, and feel his soul

Any pet peeves?
A few of my pet peeves are, people who shove their opinions down your throat, negative people, and littering. Don't mess with Texas, yo.

Tell us something about you not too many people know.
Not too many people know that I run all of my own social media accounts, create my own photoshoot concepts, and do all of the editing. Sometimes my videos will take a while because I am trying to find the right song, and I am a perfectionist about it.

If you can change any one thing about you, what would it be?
I would change my pale winter skin into my beautiful summer glow year round. I'm part Native American, so just a few days in the sun gives me the perfect bronze. Two days into winter, I'm translucent again

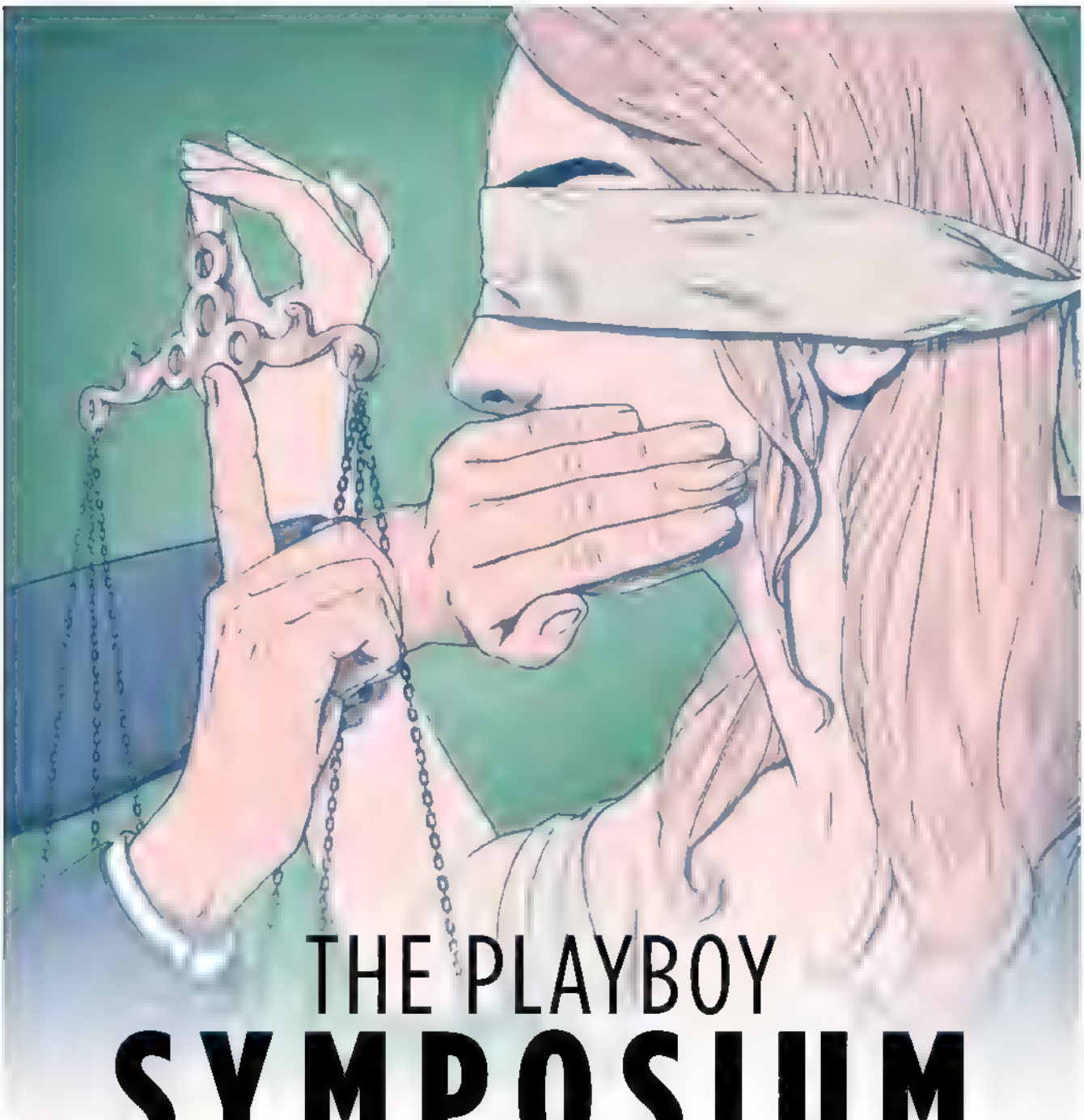
Do you like to travel? Where is your favorite vacation destination?
My favorite thing to do is travel. The architecture in France is breathtaking, the beaches in Cabo are unreal, and Colorado just feels like my second home. I still really want to visit Greece one day, the pictures I've seen are so dreamy. The history is also a big part for me. I love learning and growing as a person.

Would you prefer to read the book or watch the movie?
I prefer to read the book, and then watch the movie. I like seeing the characters like come to different expectations that you have, and seeing how differently things unfold.

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
My biggest challenge was [illegible] people think about me, and to start [illegible] I can use my influence to [illegible] and focus on things that I [illegible]

You're officially a Playboy model, what does this mean to you?
I was on the 2014 Playboy U.S. Swimsuit calendar cover, and am happy to have another opportunity to work with Playboy. I feel incredibly blessed, and completely ecstatic to be part of such an iconic family.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?
I'd like to be hosting my own travel show, land a role in a mainstream soap opera, and be a shark on sharktank in 10 years. Seems like a lot, but I think it's doable :) I have a huge fanbase that I love with all of my heart, and I'm excited to see where this journey takes us. With their help, my work ethic, and my mindset, anything is possible.



THE PLAYBOY SYMPOSIUM

A collection of provocative pieces that probe the inner workings and outer limits of freedom of expression

Allow us to introduce a new series: a loosely themed collection of essays and reported pieces chosen by our editors with an eye toward covering a lot of ground in a few pages, provoking debate among our readers and allowing ostensibly separate issues to intersect one another. (To the dedicated PLAYBOY reader, it's something like a cross between Forum and the Playboy Panel series, with the odd satire piece thrown in.) What does religious liberty have to do with freedom of speech on college campuses? How can social media be equally effective for glossy brands and doomsday militias? It's our hope that the following pages will inspire you to consider these questions and America's changing relationship with the First Amendment. So come to the table; we're waiting

ILLUSTRATION BY **SARAH MAXWELL**

FICTION, FACTS AND FEMA CAMPS

Social media has proven that even the most outlandish conspiracy theories are impervious to reality. **Leah Sottile** questions whose job it is to make sure they don't turn violent

Back in 2015 I was working on a story about preppers — the folks who stockpile doomsday essentials such as canned food, water, guns and gold and I talked to a woman who ran a store that sold supplies one might need at the end of the world

"America is under a judgment from God," she told me. "My belief is we're going to go to bed one Friday night and wake up Saturday morning, and we're going to be in a bank holiday. And when the banks open a week later, the dollar will be devalued by 50 percent. It's set up like a house of cards and when it comes down, it's going to come down all at once."

She explained that Americans would be rounded up and taken to massive concentration camps that the Federal Emergency Management Agency had been building all around the country. In fact, there was one right by my house in Spokane, Washington, at the county fairgrounds. Her proof? "The fencing at the fairground now leans in," she said, "It's to keep people in."

It was the first time I'd ever heard such a thing the idea that the top section of a fence would turn its barbed-wire face inward to prevent those within its bounds from escaping — and I drove directly to the fairgrounds, made two quick loops around and saw that, no, the fences did not demonstrate any sort of inward lean I didn't have the heart to call her back and tell her

Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow at the Anti-Defamation League's Center on Extremism, says the theory that Americans are being forced into government camps is a foundational tale of the militia movement. It's part of the broader idea that "the whole rest of the world has been taken over by a globalist, socialist, tyrannical government that they describe as the New World Order," Pitcavage says. "The United States is the last bastion of freedom." For now

Pitcavage read about the FEMA camps in a pamphlet as early as 1994. Around 2008 he noticed a resurgence of interest in militias and the FEMA camp theory

"This is the time when social media really takes over the internet," he says. Just like everyone else, the members of the militia movement flocked to the new platforms. "The internet allows things to spread very far, very fast," Pitcavage adds. "It also allows many more people to accidentally come across a conspiracy theory" Once restricted to paper flyers and dubbed VHS tapes, the FEMA theory was suddenly virtually boundless. And though the delivery method might have changed, the verbiage hadn't

"I found that fascinating," Pitcavage says. "If this started in 1994, how could all these alleged hundreds of concentration camps not have been exposed over the following 15 years?"

He tells me it probably wouldn't have mattered if I had informed the prepper lady that the tops of the fences at the fairgrounds weren't actually leaning inward. Local militias often "investigate" suspected FEMA camps and other hot spots, reporting their findings to their followers. Last summer, after a leader of a local vigilante group claimed he had discovered evidence of a "sex camp" that victimized children in Tucson, militias including the Three Percenters allegedly planned to drive there from all over the country to look into it. Along with local police, the group found it was, in fact, an abandoned homeless encampment. But even that didn't dissuade those who wanted to believe.

That's common, Pitcavage says. Investigations often prompt conspiracy theorists simply to look elsewhere for evidence. "They set up an almost impossibly high bar of proof," he says.

So where does it all lead? Obviously the government's not going to cop to building FEMA camps, offering a sheepish Walter White–style "You got us!" Nor can the theory be curbed legally — and Mike Wood, a lecturer in psychology at the University of Winchester, argues that we shouldn't want that. It's not a bad thing for a citizenry to be skeptical of its government. It's when those theories turn violent — such as when a man brought a gun into a Washington, D.C.-area pizza joint because he believed it to be the center of a Hillary Clinton–supported pedophile ring — that they become an issue. At that point, when theories devolve into threats, social media platforms have the power to act. Last August, loads of content from conspiracy-theory godfather Alex Jones was banned from YouTube and several other platforms for violating rules about hate speech and bullying. Perhaps his most virulent — and viral — theory questioned the very reality of the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, which led to endless harassment of the victims' parents.

"As private companies, Apple, Facebook and Spotify can decide what content appears on their platforms," Lata Nott, executive director of the First Amendment Center at the Freedom Forum Institute in Washington, D.C., told USA Today after the ban. Despite the earth-spanning influence of social media, it isn't the public sphere — and the First Amendment (theoretically, anyway) rules only over the latter.

But even forced off the internet, conspiracy theories can be impervious to evidence thanks to their own logical loophole. Rob Brotherton, author of the 2015 book *Suspicious Minds: Why We Believe Conspiracy Theories*, tells me, " I'd go so far as to say that, logically, it's impossible to disprove a conspiracy theory. They are inherently about secret knowledge. If the conspiracy was real, and if it was as good as the conspiracy theorists think it is, then of course there would be no definitive proof — that just means the conspiracy is working."

So when someone like Jones is banned, or when fake news is removed from Facebook, it's all too easy to say, "Of course they took it down. They know we're right." Social media allows the proliferation of good ideas and totally harebrained ones alike. But it's belief, especially in our digital cacophony, that's ultimately more powerful than truth

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Leah Sottile is a Portland, Oregon–based writer and host of the Bundyville podcast

THE OTHER CAMPUS CRISIS

Conservatives argue that liberal students are stifling their right to speak at colleges and universities. But is it all an act? **Caroline Orr** investigates

If you were to listen solely to Tucker Carlson or Laura Ingraham, you might be inclined to believe America's educational institutions are in the grip of a full-blown free-speech crisis. The refrain is familiar: Colleges, once hailed as bastions of free expression and open debate, are devolving into insular safe spaces where liberal professors coddle students with trigger warnings as right-of- center speakers are chased off campus by hordes of intolerant, indoctrinated snowflakes. Recent studies, however, suggest otherwise. Of note, a 2016 Knight Foundation survey found college students who support speech restrictions on campus are outnumbered more than two to one by those who don't.

That said, a threat to the free expression of ideas at colleges and universities is looming, but it isn't coming from students, professors or leftist indoctrination. It's coming from organizations that fund a so-called "free speech" movement that aims to exploit on-campus confrontations for political gain. With campuses doubling as breeding grounds for the next generation of political leaders, a network of right-wing groups has ramped up their targeting of these institutions to further sow national discord and inject conservative ideology into student groups and campus culture. At the same time, they support legislation that shuts down any pushback.

One of the most prominent players is Young America's Foundation, which spent more than $8 million on campus events in 2015. Described as a "conservative youth organization" that seeks to "restore sanity" on college campuses, YAF has been a fixture of the mainstream conservative movement for nearly half a century. Author Ann Coulter, White House senior policy advisor Stephen Miller and National Rifle Association senior advisor Chuck Cunningham are all part of the YAF network.

Between 2005 and 2015, YAF spent more than $50 million on campus speaking events. In 2016 the group funded 111 speakers on 77 campuses nationwide. As it operates nationally, YAF has made a name for itself by deploying controversial public figures — from anti-Islam hard-liners such as Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller and David Horowitz to mainstream conservative figures such as Ben Shapiro and Rick Santorum — to speak on liberal campuses, knowing it could provoke a backlash that can later be exploited as "proof" of a free-speech crisis.

In addition to paying for speakers, YAF coordinates with campus organizations to host "free speech" events and sponsor "boot camps" where students are taught to confront liberal classmates and professors with aggressive tactics. These activities earned at least one university-based YAF chapter, at Michigan State University, the official designation of a hate group — the only student hate group in the country. The chapter was designated as such for hosting white-supremacist speakers, organizing a "Koran desecration contest" and creating "Catch an Illegal Alien Day."

While YAF may be the most well funded and deeply connected of the conservative groups participating in the campus free-speech wars, it isn't the only one. The Leadership Institute positions itself as an activism-centered group that trains foot soldiers, or Campus Correspondents. The organization is linked to James O'Keefe's Project Veritas, which tried to discredit sexual-harassment allegations against Alabama Senate candidate Roy Moore in 2017 by providing false testimony to *The Washington Post*. According to a letter penned by O'Keefe requesting donations, the Leadership Institute's Campus Correspondents are "freedom fighters" tasked with learning "how to defeat the radical left." They seek to "bring down professors and school officials," "stop the advance" of "dangerous leftism dead in its tracks" and "fight back against" the "growing insanity" of liberalism on campus "before it destroys our country." The institute also runs the Campus Reform project, which calls itself a "watchdog to the nation's higher education system" focused on "expos[ing] bias and abuse on the nation's college campuses." On its website, Campus Reform enthusiastically recruits students to join it in fighting back against the "evil empire" of leftism in higher education.

Turning Point USA, which brands itself as a "24/7-365 activist organization," is another key player in the battle to redefine free speech on campus. The group, led by communications director Candace Owens, has been accused of organizing staged confrontations. It has launched Professor Watchlist, a database of professors tracked for their supposed liberal or leftist ideologies. Professors have reportedly faced harassment, threats and calls for their dismissal after being added to the list.

In a cynical twist, the same conservative donors backing these organizations are also pouring money into efforts to stifle campus dissent, with such investments already paying off in the form of draconian anti-freespeech legislation. In the first few months of 2017 alone, Republican lawmakers in at least eight states introduced so-called campus free-speech bills that prohibit students from engaging in protest in a way that "disrupts" the speech of anyone who has been invited to speak on campus. By March 2018, similar bills had been introduced in at least 16 states, half of which have already passed. In total, 25 states have introduced legislation purporting to protect free speech on campus by cracking down on student protests, encouraging harsh punishment for banned categories of protest and mandating how universities deal with issues related to hate speech and harassment.

Many of these states have passed legislation based on a model bill, the Campus Free Speech Act, designed by the Goldwater Institute. The organization is bankrolled by the Koch brothers and the Mercer family, two of the country's most prominent megadonors, and the legislation's implications are chilling. In states where the model bill is passed, colleges can impose academic and legal sanctions on student protesters for "shouting down" a speaker or engaging in other expressive acts , including chanting and singing, during demonstrations. In Wisconsin, which passed a particularly harsh version of the bill, students who are found to have disrupted the free expression of another person (including non-members of the university) can be expelled after a third strike. The model legislation also seeks to effectively force universities to allow any and all speakers on campus and prevent administrators from disinviting speakers.

Under the guise of free speech, conservative donors are pumping millions into an orchestrated effort to force their political agenda onto college campuses. And when they run into pushback, they cynically accuse their critics of censorship and cite it as evidence of a free-speech "crisis." In fact, it exists only because they manufactured it. So yes, free speech on campus is facing a reckoning. But as with all things political, one need only follow the money to find the real threat.

Caroline Orr is a behavioral scientist and an editor at Shareblue Media, a progressive news outlet

IN BAD FAITH

Christopher Stroop points out some unseemly similarities in the weaponization of the First Amendment when it comes to religious liberty and free speech

The theocratic Christian right, alongside fringe alt-right voters, is at the core of the success of President Donald Trump, whose presidency has been marked by GOP-enabled disinformation campaigns and a brazen disregard for democracy. In the 2016 presidential election, 81 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump. That may be why the MAGA crowd seems to weaponize bad-faith arguments for religious liberty as often as it does for free speech, with the ultimate goal of restricting the freedom of others. How do we counter dishonest appeals to democratic values?

In the first volume of *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, published in 1945, the Austrian-born British philosopher Karl Popper warns that "in order to maintain a tolerant society, the society must be intolerant of intolerance." In his seminal 1971 A Theory of Justice, however, American political philosopher John Rawls argues that those committed to justice should extend tolerance to "intolerant sects." Yet even Rawls concedes there should be limits "when the tolerant sincerely and with reason believe that their institutions of liberty are in danger."

According to Frederick Clarkson, a senior research analyst at the think tank Political Research Associates, "the demagogic statements by President Trump and his allies who call the media the 'enemy of the people' are the most serious threats to free speech" in our current political environment. Melissa Hooper, a director at the nonpartisan organization Human Rights First, similarly argues that we should be concerned that "leaders like the president and other influential figures are confusing facts they don't like with false information."

People who are quick to decry what they perceive to be restrictions on their speech tend to use rhetorical strategies similar to those who decry encroachments on religious liberty. The former conflate First Amendment rights with unregulated access to prestigious platforms, as demonstrated by the brouhaha surrounding Milo Yiannopoulos's canceled appearance at the University of California, Berkeley in 2017, *The New York Times's* 2018 firing of Quinn Norton based on her ties to white supremacist Andrew Auernheimer, and *The Atlantic's* termination of Kevin Williamson for a 2014 podcast in which he expressed support for hanging women who've had abortions.

Williamson's statement and his subsequent firing — neatly illustrates how the battle over "religious freedom" waged by the Christian right (which may finally achieve its goal of overturning Roe v. Wade now that Brett Kavanaugh is on the Supreme Court) intersects with bad-faith arguments about freedom of speech. This is ironic, given that evangelical colleges such as Pennsylvania's Grove City College and Kentucky's Asbury University invoke "religious liberty" to justify their censorship of student newspapers and suppression of support for LGBTQ rights. For all the concern in our public sphere over liberal students and college administrations supposedly rejecting free speech, this serious campus free-speech crisis remains little-known.

When it comes to abortion, Clarkson notes that religious-liberty rhetoric has already trumped freedom of speech in some jurisdictions. "There are laws in many states that require health care workers to read scripted statements to patients with misleading claims that abortion would increase their risk of breast cancer and suicide," he says. " Government-mandated false scripts are not only a violation of the free speech of health workers but a violation of a patient's right to receive unbiased medical information."

Just as he sees "the best answer to disagreeable speech" as "more speech," Clarkson believes we must embrace a robust concept of religious freedom in order to counter the Christian right's attempts to claim it as justification for censorship and discrimination. He notes that in the case of marriage equality, "many Christians, Christian institutions and non-Christians honor the love of samesex couples." In other words, religious liberty should not preference anti-LGBTQ religion over affirming religion.

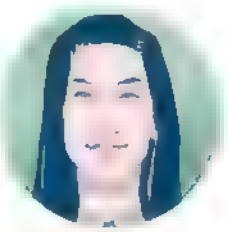
"Bad-faith arguments with respect to freedom of religion often fail to account for the fact that the argument denies the rights of another person," Hooper says. Given that the rise of American authoritarianism is occurring in an era of bots, trolls and social media manipulation, it will take more than more speech and the embrace of pluralism to restore civil society. Clarkson prescribes deeper involvement in electoral politics and a renewed emphasis on the practice of democratic citizenship. Hooper agrees, suggesting that to counter disinformation, we need to focus on teaching civics and media literacy.

The first step is admitting we have a problem. Living with authoritarian-identifying leaders in power is like being in an abusive relationship: We're subjected to continual gaslighting. If we want to preserve democracy, we must recognize that not all arguments that invoke democratic values aim to protect all citizens.

Christopher Stroop is a senior researcher with the University of Innsbruck's Postsecular Conflicts Project

SCIENCE SAYS

Debra W. Soh asks, What happens when social justice warriors reject scientific data?



In the discipline of sexology, the study of gender dysphoria, or when one's gender identity doesn't match their birth sex, has become a controversial area of research. Consider the backlash last August when *PLOS ONE*, a peerreviewed scientific journal, published the first study to examine rapid-onset gender dysphoria, or ROGD, a phenomenon the study claims is growing among adolescents who come out as transgender. This coming out, as described by the study's author, Dr. Lisa Littman, "seemed to occur in the context of belonging to a peer group where one, multiple, or even all of the friends have become gender dysphoric and transgender- identified during the same timeframe." Littman, a physician and assistant professor at Brown University, conducted the online study, a 90-question survey of 256 parents, and concluded that ROGD may be an effect of "social contagion," or "the spread of affect or behaviors through a population."

The study ignited the internet almost immediately after publication, with some leftleaning media outlets calling it everything from "junk" to "anti-trans." Think Progress's LGBTQ editor, Zack Ford, wrote, "All she did was anonymously survey parents from the exact same anti-trans online parent groups that invented the concept, codifying their totally bogus myth in the guise of a scientific study."

Instead of defending Littman's research, Brown University rescinded its corresponding

press release five days after publication, which happened to be the same day *PLOS ONE* announced it would review the article to seek "further expert assessment on the study's methodology and analyses." Bess Marcus, dean of Brown's School of Public Health, said "removing the article from news distribution is the most responsible course of action."

Speaking as a former sexual neuroscientist, it has been my experience that those who point out the existence of ROGD are often labeled transphobic, whether they're researchers, journalists or parents. Regarding Littman's study, it's disturbing that opponents criticized the sample group — parents of transgender teens who answered the survey on one of three selected websites — because they obviously hadn't read the research. Of note, roughly 86 percent of the parents endorsed gay marriage and 88 percent stated transgender people deserve equal rights and protections. About 60 percent of parents reported their children had at least one mental health disorder, such as anxiety or autism, prior to announcing they were transgender. Many reported a history of trauma or self-harm. Most important, none of the children met the diagnostic criteria for gender dysphoria in childhood as defined by psychiatry's *DSM-5* guidelines.

In addition, many parents reported their kids came out after spending vast amounts of time online, including watching transition videos on YouTube. For about 37 percent of parents who reported about friends, more than half of their kids' friend groups had also come out as transgender. This is more than 70 times the prevalence of transgender people in the general population. The study also showed how young people might receive social benefits for identifying as trans, such as increased popularity among peers and greater protection by teachers. Some of the websites accessed by young people even provided instructions on getting approved for hormone therapy.

Opponents of the study argued that trans people weren't consulted as part of the research. This complaint is naive. The role of a scientist is to be objective, and a well-designed study — along with institutional review boards that ensure research is executed ethically — operates with this in mind. Whether or not scientists consult with or identify as part of the population they are studying is irrelevant.

Littman agrees that more research on ROGD is required but stands by her findings. So do many academics, stemming from the fact that it's rare for an academic journal to place an already published scientific paper under review, considering its methodology has already been vetted during the peer- review process.

I worry that, given the negative press *Slate* wrote that Littman's "anti-trans study mischaracterized a real condition," for example *PLOS ONE* was influenced by a fear that the findings were politically incorrect. For one, public capitulation only promotes the idea that ROGD is a made-up condition fabricated by bigots to invalidate transgender people. Secondly, reconsidering the methodology of a peer-reviewed study after publication isn't just a question of academic rigor; it can amount to censorship of findings.

I don't deny that the transgender community has faced discrimination and hardship. Although transitioning can be beneficial for some adults, the same cannot always be said for children. Based on my experience, in the case of ROGD in particular, a girl's proclamation of gender dysphoria commonly has nothing to do with gender. There are a host of reasons why a young woman may feel discomfort around being female; they don't necessarily mean she's gender dysphoric.

The way the chips have fallen around Littman's study could set a precedent and broadcast a wider message that academic journals can be swayed if a particular group deems an article's findings unpalatable. In a time when the president's administration is attempting to ignore the research of climate scientists, we must also protect science that — while not immediately comfortable — can lead to a better understanding of the human condition.

Debra W. Soh holds a Ph.D. in sexual neuroscience research from York University and writes about the science and politics of sex.

I JUST LOVE CONTENT

An unabashed and totally not satirical valentine from **Scott Dikkers,** founder of The Onion

Hello — you've just met the biggest fan of content ever! I love consuming content from a variety of content-delivery mediums. I love written content; that one's my favorite, probably. But I also like video content. Podcast content too. I can't decide! As long as it's an effective content strategy, I'm hooked!

I really love content that interacts meaningfully with my demographic group — when relevant content takes me on an emotional journey, starting with increased brand awareness and culminating in a positive end-user experience that leaves someone statistically similar to my age, race, sex, income level, years of college education and credit card ownership with a rich, satisfied feeling of elevated brand interest. I want a brand interaction I'll never forget!

The other day I saw this amazing content in my feed. It beautifully took up the space between the advertorials and pop-ups and commercial messages. It might have been integrated branded content, or maybe it was a celebrity-endorsed sponsored post. Whatever it was, it was awesome, because content is just the best!

I recently read this piece in the opinionmercial section of the newspaper. Talk about a high content-differentiation factor! This was content guaranteed to have excellent ROI for the marketing professional who served it. I was impressed! I always make it a point to contribute to good open rates and clickthroughs. I just want to give a little back to the content I love so much!

On a more serious note, content doesn't just infotain me, it keeps me up to date on the issues I care about. I follow important events like politics. My content platforms know all my opinion data and send me the best content tailored to what I think, which means it's true!

Did I tell you I have a poster of content in my bedroom? I love going to sleep looking at content on my wall!

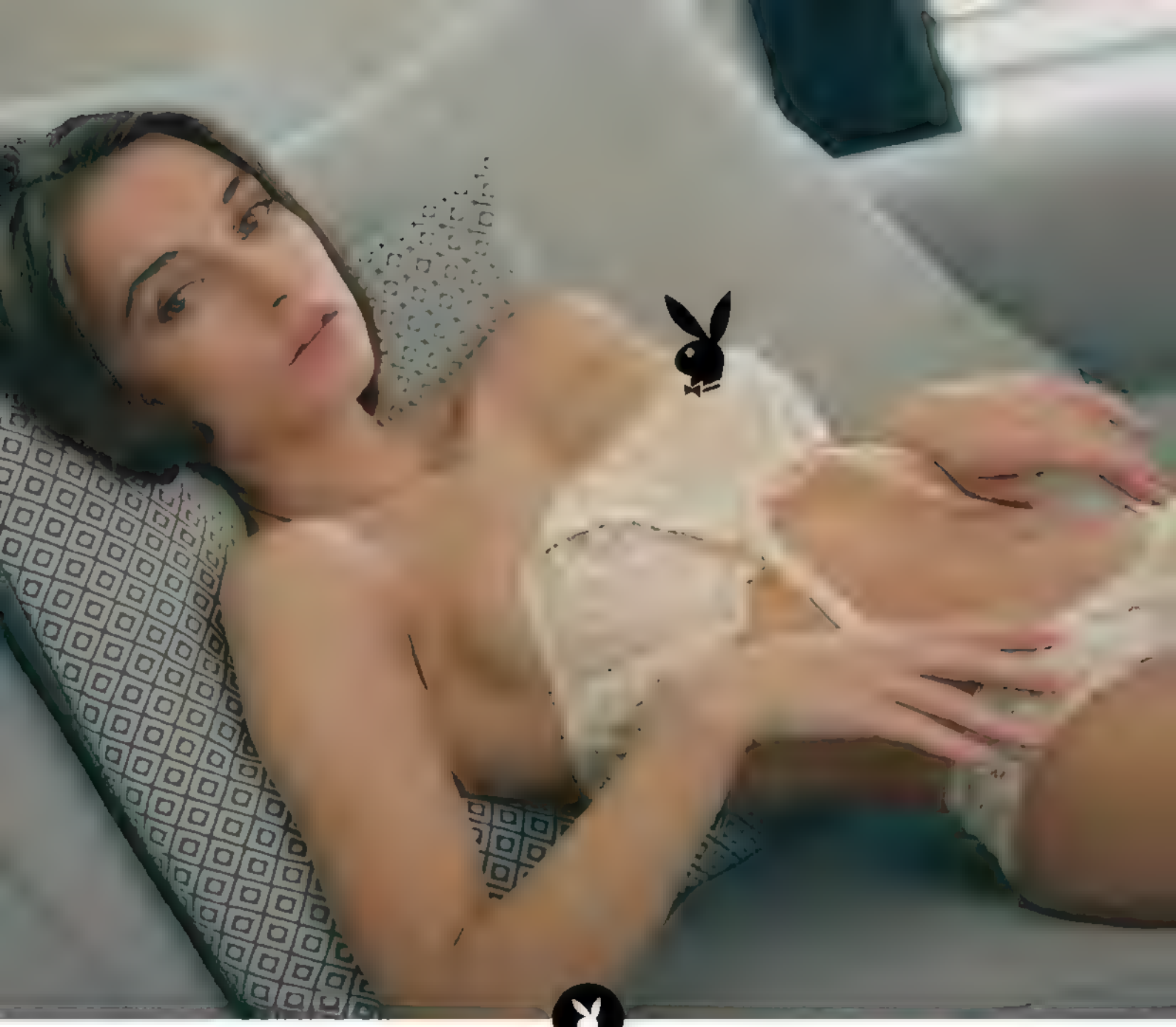
Oddly, I never dream. My nights are just a dark abyss with no content.

We're living in the Golden Age of content. Nowadays, there's so much content on cable TV and in theaters and on all those great OTT platforms — I can't possibly consume it all, but I wish I could! Maybe someday the content creators will figure out a way to inject content directly into my mind. Then I won't have to think at all! My most basic responses to sensory input will be replaced with content notifications. Wouldn't that be amazing? *Ding!* Time for content!

However, as a responsible consumer of content, I believe it's important to protect my content from hackers. If they invent that content-plugged-into-your-brain thing I mentioned, I would hate to have my brain hacked! Then people could make me believe anything they wanted, and that would be terrible!

At least now I control my own thoughts. And you know what I'm thinking? I just love content!

Scott Dikkers's books Outrageous Marketing: The Story of The Onion and How to Build a Powerful Brand With No Marketing Budget and Welcome to the Future, Which Is Mine are out now.



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VAL STEFAN

Photography by **MIKE COHEN** *Model* **@VAL_STEFAN_**

Describe yourself in three words
Sexy! Strong! Bright.

Were you excited to shoot for Playboy?
I was extremely excited moreover it was a long-time dream for me.

What was it like starting out as a model?
This was my several challenge I had to meet with the same creative energy and ambition to succeed.

What would you consider to be your biggest challenge as a model so far?
Getting the opportunity to shoot for famous magazines such as Playboy.

Describe your perfect day off when you are not modelling?
Jumping on a plane and flying first-class to an exotic destinations.

Do you feel more like a city person or a country person?
Definitely city person I love the dynamics.

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be?
This is definitely London, Where I belong!

Do you have a secret talent?
I do have many, but we will keep it a secret :)

A guilty pleasure?
Having breakfast in bed.

Which song is absolutely certain to make you cry whenever you hear it?
I'll Be Missing You by Puff Daddy.

What is your favourite word in any language and what does it mean?
Abundance - an amount that is more than enough.

Any last words you would like to share with the readers?
Follow your dreams no matter how late you think it might be!

The Modern Era

A WOULD-BE WRITER HAS TROUBLE PLOTTING THE OUTLINE OF HIS OWN ROMANCE; IT'S FEAR AND LOVING IN LOS ANGELES

BY **SARAH BRAUNSTEIN**

I had no intention of marrying Maryanne. Six months with her was long enough. Six months was longer than I wanted to be with any woman, even one as pretty as Maryanne.

We were not a decade out of college, my friends and I, and no one was in any hurry to pair up. We liked to drink. That was our primary activity. We drank at brunch, and we brunched several times a week, and we drank at dinner, and we ate out together most nights. Maryanne was not one of us. She didn't drink, or go to comedy clubs or bars, or want to be an actor or a writer or a comic. She had not gone to college. She was the receptionist at my dentist's office.

I loved my dentist. His name was Dr. Guerra. He had an exceedingly quiet voice and slow, methodical hands, and he was tall and trim like a dancer. I admired the linen wallpaper in his office and his glossy succulents. His receptionist too, who sat behind the desk looking faintly alarmed. You could say she dressed like an immigrant, Kmart jeans and generic athletic shoes, but she was white from Nebraska. Her bras were tiny yet industrial. She was the only person I knew who'd grown up in a trailer park, and the only person I knew who sent money home.

"Not a *trailer park*," Maryanne said. "A motor home lodge."

The distinction struck me as noble and pitiful. I feared going to this place. I did not want to meet Maryanne's parents.

• • •

On the day I planned to break up with Maryanne, I woke with an erection that was not for her. A blurry figure swayed in my mind, dream residue, a redhead, and I thought, Good, a redhead. I want to say I invented her, and I suppose I did, but she resembled a TV star of the moment because I was not very original. The TV star was on billboards all over the city, lit from beneath at night.

I messaged Kyla and Chris S. and Chris K. and Lucy that I was going to break up with Maryanne and meet them afterward for a drink. *Aww, really? Poor Maryanne! Such a sweetheart!* But they didn't know her well, had said hello only a few times, and Lucy said: *We'll drink to your sorrows. We've missed you, baby.*

I'd missed them too. It would be good to be back in the fold. We were like sitcom friends — raised on sitcoms, now auditioning and writing for them, we modeled our lives on these shows. Our friendship group had its own cultures, traditions, holiday specials, ancillary friend groups. Some of

ILLUSTRATION BY **SPIROS HALARIS**

us had trust funds. Most of us were white. We dated each other sometimes, or dated a member of a side group, and then came back and cracked jokes about it. Maryanne, I knew, was a short arc She didn't have a TV or a computer. She had no aesthetic, and she was not funny. She thought stand-up was "braggy." My friends had understood, had not begrudged my nights away, because she was sexy, they agreed, in a complicated way, like a sexy Anne Frank

I called her at work. "Can I pick you up at four? I think we should go for a walk "

"Yes, please," she said. "I'd like that very much."

• • •

Maryanne was wrong to have had it bad for me I was the oldest of three blonde boys from the suburbs of Philly. I had been given an Audi on my 16th birthday, which I crashed three weeks later I kept a list of the women I slept with, most of whose names I remembered Maryanne's name, on the day I prepared to break up with her, wasn't the last one.

Maryanne had no list She kept a diary. She read historical novels and Time magazines from Dr Guerra's office. I had never known someone who wasn't a grandmother to read Time. She slept in a long nightgown, a column of nonworking buttons on its bib, and she would never try cocaine, or bubble tea, and she would not come to the nude Korean baths, which I considered one of the great wonders of Los Angeles. In bed she was shy, hot with shame Sometimes she snorted with embarrassed laughter She hadn't gone down on me yet or let me go down on her It's the modern era, I wanted to say. Her goodness de-sexed her I didn't want the job of her

• • •

"Don't you want to be something?" I asked her once, early on. I felt I could be bold with her — nothing I said seemed to hurt her. "I have a job," she'd replied, shrugging. We were in her apartment, on a street in Hollywood She was sweeping her buckling linoleum floor and I was sitting in a chair, drinking a beer, watching her. She wore pink canvas sneakers. She had a cheap corn-husk broom that disintegrated as you swept, so that you ended up sweeping the broom pieces, so that the chore just went on and on

"Don't you want more than a job?"

"I have more than that," she said, and rested the broom against the wall, came over to sit on my lap. She wore tiny golden earrings, like Puerto Rican babies When I sucked one between my teeth it felt like a bullet.

But we couldn't even watch TV together

She had the worst taste, loved the battling pastry chefs, ninjas on the monkey bars. At night she rubbed Vaseline on her elbows and on the soles of her feet She washed her face with a bar of orange Dial. When she called Nebraska she spoke to her father in low, soothing tones A drunk, I presumed. I knew that voice That was how you talked to a drunk But I didn't ask because I didn't want to know I was not interested. I smoked cigarettes outside

• • •

I liked the drive to Dr Guerra's office I liked seeing the Santa Monica pier, the Ferris wheel turning over the ocean, liked knowing there were sharks out there not a lot of the time, no, but there could be sharks, and a person could theoretically be mauled or eaten. That this horror might happen in such proximity to Dr Guerra's office disturbed me pleasantly. Maryanne was waiting out front, standing on the curb slightly pigeon-toed, her big purse hooked on her elbow.

I kissed her hello This would be the last time I'd kiss her.

In the car she told me about a boy who'd come to the office that day. He was under the impression that the dentist was going to remove his teeth. Clean them, Maryanne had explained, but he hadn't seemed to understand. The kid looked so sorrowful, she told me, so resigned, when the hygienist came to take him

Dr. Guerra gave his Thursdays to the underserved community. Sanctuary dentistry, he called it

"Poor kid," she said, gazing out the window

"Well, that poor kid has the best dentist in L A ," I said. "He's got that."

She said, "I didn't go to a dentist until I was 14." There was no pity in her voice and no expectation for pity. Sometimes she did that leveled an awful fact on me with a kind of bemused indifference She never saw a dentist Or The bus driver fondled her. Other rotten things spoken so calmly, acceptingly, it made me almost sick. Where was her sense of violation?

We were driving to Griffith Park. That would be a good place to do it, I thought. She would not make a scene there But the ride was too long and traffic was worse than usual, several roads shut down for protests or festivals, and I realized halfway there that I should have found a nearer park, but then it was too late to turn around. I considered doing it right there, in the car, in steamy traffic, except that struck me as indecent. And so we went

on. And since Maryanne never had too much to say — I was the talker — we passed the ride mostly in silence.

• • •

When we arrived at Griffith Park there was a sign ***Parking full. No parking beyond this point! Shuttle to observatory 25 cents.***

I had been hoping to find a spot close to the top. I didn't like this extra step. Complicated transit would make the breakup harder, add to the awkwardness. But there we were, and so I parked and we walked to the place where the shuttle came, a dusty cutout on the side of the road.

A Chinese family with an ancient grandmother stood there waiting. There were six of them. The grandmother wore beautiful red silk shoes covered with roadside dust, like something you'd see on a movie poster.

"Only a *quarter?* Nothing costs a quarter anymore," Maryanne said to me. She seemed genuinely happy.

"Nothing indeed!" said the man whose arm was linked with the ancient woman's.

Maryanne held a quarter between the thumb and index finger of each hand. She had a wary smile on her face, and red cheeks, like a child in the line for the scariest ride at the fair.

More people joined us to wait. Two women spoke loudly about the national darkness. The crowd hummed with agreement. Even the grandmother lifted a bony ancient finger in solidarity. The impeachment hearings were in their infancy in those days, and everyone in Los Angeles walked around peaceably raving.

"I wish we could go someplace and not hear about him," Maryanne whispered in my ear. "Can you take me to the desert this weekend?"

"I've got a busy weekend."

"Someplace where he's not screaming. Take me there."

"There's no place like that left," I told her.

She had not voted for anyone. Neither had I. But her parents in Nebraska had voted for him. Mine did too, but I didn't tell her this, because I never spoke of my parents.

The shuttle arrived and we all crammed on. There were only a few seats on the sides, and the old people and children took them. Maryanne was too short to reach the handrail so I held her. In this way I took responsibility for us both. I wanted to be a good boyfriend to the end — to look like one.

The shuttle smelled of gas and industrial cleaner. It wheezed its way up the mountain switchbacks. I had been on this road many times and so did not participate in the appreciation of nature along with everyone else. I prepared what I was going to say. Then, to gather my nerve, I thought about the redhead.

But I forgot that Maryanne had never been to the observatory before. I had failed to realize that this iconic place would be new to her. And so when we arrived, when we got to the center of the courtyard, to that highest place above the city, Maryanne stopped walking. She blinked, turned in a circle. It was only then, watching her take in the view, the Hollywood sign, the telescopes, the sun beginning its descent, that I understood how unkind it was to do it here. It was a landmark. I would ruin it for her. What had I been thinking? Who orchestrates a destination *breakup?*

Which was funny, actually. I made a note to use that.

"Oh, Tanner!" she cried. "Tanner!" Because she had come from the plains, of course, she had never seen such a view. She pointed to Spanish roofs. She pointed to City Hall, to all the cars below, to downtown. She marveled at the color of the sky. Like a jelly bean! Like sherbet! Oh, Tanner! And yes, I thought about holding off. Going down after sunset, grabbing dinner at a Chinese dive I liked in Los Feliz. We could break up over lo mein. I considered this, but would it have been kinder? I imagined the awkwardness of the fortune cookies.

I didn't expect she'd stay in the city for much longer. Surely she'd return to Nebraska and lick her wounds. There'd be a new receptionist at Dr. Guerra's office. Maryanne would find a much better match back in Nebraska, could pick anyone she wanted back there. Any doughy exquarterback would kill for her, any sweetheart cop. I wanted this for her. I wanted her to go away and also, somehow, to remain the receptionist.

We paused at an overlook. "A postcard," Maryanne said. "Isn't it?" She made her hands the shape of a postcard and looked through them.

The slashes of light on the ground were the streets where I met my friends. Love for the city filled my heart. Love for the city vanquished her winsomeness. I said what I had prepared to say.

I'm sorry. You deserve better. Not ready for commitment. Not ready for monogamy. *Monogamy:* I used that word several times. It was such a welcome addition to the breakup toolbox. An ideological word, something to consider strenuously. People were polyamorous those days the way they were vegans. It was a way to ethically sleep around, to feel honest and devious at once, and I said, "Look, I don't think monogamy is working out for me right now. I feel I should be honest. I tried it, I gave it a shot...." I went on and on and she listened without expression.

I thought about holding off. Going down after sunset, grabbing dinner at a Chinese dive. We could break up over lo mein.

Then she said, "I wanted to go to the desert this weekend. Are you saying you want to see other people? Like, along with me? Me and other people too? Or you want me gone? I'd really like to go to the desert."

"I don't want you *gone,* Maryanne. That's so extreme. Why do you have to say it like that?"

She raised and lowered her bony shoulders. Her expression was baleful, pale. She looked exactly as I'd feared, prettily stricken. It's easy to get sentimental about pretty people, I told myself. Be done. In and out. But I found myself dissembling. I said, "I need some space. That's all. I need to think. Give me some time. I'm not saying we should end it permanently. But a break. We're just so unalike, you and me."

She blinked. "But you're just like me," she said.

You're a goddamn extraterrestrial, I wanted to say, and then I did. I held my breath, waited for her response, but it didn't

seem to faze her, which only made me more committed to ending it. She said, "If I drank, if I went to bars with you, would you keep me around?"

"Why do you put it that way? You want to be *kept around?* Jesus. You're way too pretty to be so needy."

"I used to drink," she said finally, resolvedly, "I can do it again. I used to. Beer in my bedroom All alone And then vodka."

"You realize how compliant you are? Why are you *like* that?"

"I'm like you," she said. "I keep telling you."

I wanted her eyes to leak, wanted those tears to spill over, so I told her then about the two women I'd slept with during the six months we'd been dating. I told her about Vivian, about Vivian's private piercings, and about the woman I met at the Magic Castle whose name I never got, who appeared on the list only as *Magic Castle*. I told her about the list. I was a pig, I swore to her. I substantiated my argument.

"Oh," she said, taking a step back. "You did those things?"

"I did," I said. "I do."

Oh my God he's going too fast Oh no, no, this isn't good. Oh no. Oh hell Too fast."

No one else spoke. The shuttle descended And it did feel treacherous, the pitch steep, brakes whining, but people do not fly off the road in Los Angeles. "Much too fast!" the crazy man said. "This thing can't handle it. I know machines This is not a safe machine "

One of his kids was very young, elementary age, and played with his phone The other boy was a teenager. "Okay, Dad," the teenager said. "We're safe. Everything's good."

"Do you hear that? Too fast."

Maryanne could reach her handrail now, the handicapped one, so I didn't have to hold her.

"We'll fly off," the insane man said. "That lady," and he gestured toward Maryanne, closest to the door, "she'll fly out."

I felt my chest get hot. I was angry that he put her in his imagination, that he would throw her out of this vehicle, even in his mind

"No one's flying out," said the teenager

"She might!"

someday, someone you couldn't feel normal around. That seemed the very best thing in the world. I wanted it for all of us, for me and my friends. I wanted to get it and confer it onto them, or for someone, any one of them, to confer it onto me You couldn't date a girl like Maryanne if you were a person like this; you certainly couldn't marry her.

• • •

A soon as we were back in my car the mountain was impossible to fathom Neither of us spoke I felt like I was driving my daughter in a car without seatbelts. No one seemed safe or out for anyone but themselves I felt that I'd been assigned the task to care for this girl, and that I was too jealous to give the task to another man but couldn't do it myself.

The protests had settled down. It was dinner time. Food trucks everywhere. Nowhere wasn't a restaurant. Crowds of people milled around, jaywalking, collecting spare change, screaming epithets or singing, or being trailed by cameras, and it took forever to get to Maryanne's street.

"I'm fine, Tanner," she said when I pulled

When the redhead moved toward the bathroom, I found myself following her. She stopped. She turned.

"I misunderstood," she said. "I thought "

She began to cry but fought it, pawed ruthlessly at her eyes. She made a bleating sound, covered her mouth, looked down She stayed like that for a bit. When she raised her head again she looked calmer. She said in a calm, tired voice, "I'll miss you, Tanner "

"I'll miss you too," I told her. And maybe I would miss her, but I'd never have to go to Nebraska, never set foot in the double-wide A glorious never t hrummed i n m y b ody. I would never have to bring her to my parents She would not see the picture of me on the piano, never see my child face, helpless before an ice cream cone, in a silver frame Good riddance, Maryanne, you pathetic creature. Those words passed through my brain I believed I was owed more

• • •

There was an insane person on the shuttle down. A middle-aged man, two kids with him, Indian, or maybe Pakistani, and he said things like "Oh my God we're going to die

And I put my arm around her shoulder, around Maryanne's shoulder, but she pulled away. The crazy father saw this. He smirked at me

Maryanne surprised me. She looked at the man, and she did not smile, and she said, "I will not fall out "

The man was still smirking at me. So was the son

It's over, I told myself. Let it be over

The Chinese family, they were there too, all of us hurtling down I willed us to crash. On my phone I found several messages from my friends inquiring about the state of things, hurrying me along. They were leaving Good Luck Bar and heading to Bigfoot.

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Sometimes a celebrity would appear at Bigfoot and everyone would suck in their guts and throw back their shoulders and perform normalcy. I wanted that. That was what I wanted forever. To be coming up To wonder every morning how it would turn out. Maybe I would be one of those people

up in front. She unbuckled her seatbelt. "You shouldn't worry about me You shouldn't feel guilty Okay? I'm fine."

I said I was glad she was fine. I said, again, I was sorry. I was sure I would never see her again.

Then she said, "What about your boots?"

My boots! I had forgotten. My favorite boots brown leather lace-ups, leather soles, Italian. Very expensive. She called them my Civil War boots. Which might have been funny.

Maybe she was funny.

They were by her bed, the boots All at once I didn't trust myself. Why would I leave my boots there? I felt sick, suddenly, sour air rising into my sinuses.

She said, "Stay here. I'll be right back. I'll get them " and she leapt from the car and hurried up the walk, took the stairs two at a time to her studio apartment.

Her twin bed was up there, her purple sheets, her dresser top scattered with pennies. She had almost nothing. Just an alarm clock, a water glass, her sad communion

cross on a gold chain. She lived like a survivor of a natural disaster in a room at the YMCA.

She was not funny.

I gripped the steering wheel and took long deep breaths until the nausea began to fade.

On our first date I'd taken her to sushi. She had some sort of allergy to the wasabi and later said her mouth hurt too much to kiss. In the morning the skin around her lips was raw and scabbed, and Dr. Guerra gave her some prescription cream. "Wasn't that nice of him?" she kept saying, gazing at the tube in her hand. "I'd have paid a hundred at the clinic for that. Wasn't it awfully nice of him, Tanner?"

Did she have a crush on the dentist? I wondered but I didn't worry. I admired Dr. Guerra, trusted him, and I knew he was too decent to exploit her. He was like a father. The way he tilted his head and examined her poor sore burned mouth was how a father does, how a father is supposed to do, which made him, I sometimes joked, my father-in-law.

When Maryanne came back to the car she had my boots in a plastic bag. The bag was from a Mexican place where we sometimes got takeout. I gave her the empty bag, but I still felt like I might throw up, so I said, "Give it back?" and stuffed it between my thighs. She looked at my crotch, expressionless. Her face was empty of feeling. I did not like this face.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'll get over it."

"You will?"

"Doesn't everyone?" She shrugged. "It's a breakup. I'll move on."

I did not know this practical Maryanne. I didn't know her at all.

"Don't go, Maryanne," I said.

"What?"

"Please don't."

"You're the one who's going," she said. It was true. It was plain to see. I was sitting in the driver's seat, buckled in, the car running. My beloved boots in the passenger seat. Nothing felt truer than this. Nothing was holding me back.

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I love my wife so much. It amazes me that I almost gave her away. I turned off the car. I unbuckled. I got out, and I knelt down. I rested my knee on the oily pavement, and I asked her. Her face was calm and blank. No fold between her eyebrows. She said, "I don't know." And we looked at each other until, finally, she spoke.

"I will," she said.

I felt so sorry for her. I told her so.

"Feel how you like," she said.

We went together to Bigfoot and announced our engagement. My friends were stunned, but after a few drinks it all seemed pretty hysterical. We clinked glasses and danced and Lula played the songs we asked for, gangster rap and Dolly Parton, the last blast of irony for a very long time. Because I didn't know we'd actually move to Nebraska. I didn't know that before too long I'd find myself in a cul-de-sac with three daughters. Three girls and an aboveground pool, in which two sisters would swim in a circle, creating a whirlpool so that the little one, in her inflatable pink vest, could spin. I didn't think we'd really get married. I only knew I didn't want her to go, that I had to fix the cruelty of the evening, and that's what I came up with because I am not very original.

It was barely nine o'clock, night just beginning. I drank and she drank, we drank a good deal, and soon they set upon her, my girlfriends, these waifish and fey women, actresses, would-be models, women with head shots and podcasts. I had slept with half of them. All night they circled Maryanne, gazed at her with new attention, stroked her sleeves, her hair, examined her with comic reverence, professing their sister love in high, parodic voices. Maryanne looked so anxious again, being touched like that. I liked that she looked anxious again. Go down on her tonight, I told myself.

I was starting on my third drink when the redhead walked in. There she was. Not the dream figure or the celebrity but a better amalgam, real and not-real, herself and made-for-me. And everyone was busy with Maryanne and no one was paying attention to me, so when the redhead moved toward the bathroom, I found myself following her.

A woman like the redhead knows when she is being followed, which is all the time. She stopped. She turned. We stood facing each other, there in the dim back hall of Bigfoot, and I felt a voice call out to me — my voice but not mine, a future me, a graver me. Hold steady, champ, is what the voice said. And I said back, Why should I?

There was an old pay phone still mounted on the wall. Next to it, a framed needlepoint sampler said *Call your Mother*. I had not called my mother in a very long time and I did not want to. The presence of that sign aroused my will.

I said, "You look familiar."

She had a lovely neck, long and white, a mole marking the spot you'd like to kiss. She tilted her head. Her eyes were green. She had done something complicated and geometric with her eyeliner.

"I'm no one," she answered, a coy smile.

"I'm sure that can't be."

"Well, actually," and now her smile turned lopsided, abashed, "I'm a doctor."

"On TV?"

"Nephrology. IRL." She spoke, it seemed to me, lustily. "Kidneys," she said, and gestured to her own, and never had a more erotic word been uttered.

"You *operate* on people?"

"Sure," she said, took a step closer. "And I do other things too."

My betrothed waited for me.

Don't make me be with Maryanne, I wanted to say. Stop me. Save me! I don't want to meet Maryanne's pastor, I wanted to say, I don't want to hold her hair when she vomits in the parking lot, or to see her discount shampoo on the edge of my bathtub or her cans of chili in my cabinets. Doctor, please. There was that feeling in the air that precedes touch. We looked at each other. The camera held. Do it, I thought. I spoke to her with my mind. Do it.

"Do what?" she said, startling me, for I had spoken aloud, and whether it was fear or love that stopped me, whether it was that low voice in my mind, hold steady, hold steady, I don't know. All I know is that I could not say a word.

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I extricated myself, which I know does not deserve a medal. I know it is disgusting that men want praise for behaving with the barest decency. And yet I do want praise. That's what I want. I didn't think I had the strength to turn away. And I knew if I could turn away from this nephrologist, if I could find that in me, then I could really marry Maryanne.

I did. We did. We drank for a few years, together, hard, until she got pregnant, and then, one dawn, with a firm, solemn handshake as between scouts, we quit. Cold turkey, I say proudly. She says nothing about it. And soon the world exploded, a new era announced itself, but by then we were in Nebraska, where nothing changed too much.

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But of course kids are curious. My oldest daughter asked my wife what it had been like. Back then, she meant, during the national darkness. She is interested in chaos and perversion, like all teenagers. She collects the paraphernalia. Did you resist? my daughter wants to know. Did you knit a hat? Did you march?

"No, I didn't," Maryanne says. There is neither pride nor apology in her voice.

The girls are disappointed. They are so civic-minded, this generation, they cannot fathom our inaction. My wife shrugs. She is a hygienist now. She serves another dentist, this one less magnanimous, less glamorous, not yet 35. We invite him to our block parties. We want to set him up with someone.

"I was busy with other things," is all she says.

They are disapproving of her, but my wife doesn't let it get under her skin. She is placid, wears a faint smile. It's me who pushes back. You should be thankful, I tell my daughters, that your mother didn't resist. You wouldn't have made it here, I say to them. You wouldn't exist. A woman like that would never have saved me. ■

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